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ASSEMBLAGES OF THE FUTURE

rethinking communities after the state

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4TH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BURMA/MYANMAR STUDIES

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Volume 2: J-R

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4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies: "Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities after the State"

PROCEEDINGS

Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development (RCSD)

The International Conference on Burma Studies has been organized four times. The first International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies was held at Chiang Mai University in July 2015, focusing on the topic "Burma/Myanmar in Transition: Connectivity, Changes, and Challenges. The second ICBMS was held in 2018 at Mandalay University, co-hosted by Chiang Mai University. The third ICBMS, delayed due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the February 2021 military coup, took place as a hybrid event in March 2021 at Chiang Mai University, under the theme "Myanmar/Burma in the Changing Southeast Asia Context. Finally, Chiang Mai University (CMU) hosted the fourth International Conference on Burma Studies (ICBMS4) from August 2 to 4, 2024, under the theme "Assemblages of the Future: Rethinking Communities after the State."

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Crisis under the Coup: Gender-based Discrimination, Violence and Sexual Harassment against Myanmar Women Media Professionals

Jonathan Rhodes[1]

Myanmar Women in Media

Abstract

Women media professionals around the world face gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. Following the coup in 2021, many women media professionals relocated from Myanmar to Thailand, specifically, Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. To date, there is limited research on gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence and sexual harassment specifically targeting women in media in Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. The data that does exist has remained unpublished or with limited access. The research used a qualitative research methodology. Methods for this piece consisted of targeted focus group discussions and key informant interviews. The focus group discussions consisted of 36 women and 20 men across Chiang Mai and Mae Sot. While this piece focuses on the experiences of women as the primary sources of data, men and LGBTQ members provide important insight and perspectives through their personal experiences, as witnesses to their women colleagues' experiences, and in obtaining diverse input addressing these problems. LGBTQ members were included because their sexual orientations and gender identity are often underrepresented in women focused research. LGBTQ members participated in the groups they felt most comfortable participating in and self-selected. Safety and security were of highest priority. Therefore, the study used purposive sampling to ensure respondents had the strongest fit for the study. We then used snowball sampling to add additional focus group discussion members and key informant interview connections. The study was based on three research questions. First, what are the main forms of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment experienced by women media professionals? Secondly, in confronting these challenges, what strategies do women media professionals use when facing these challenges? Thirdly, what are the current needs to overcome these challenges according to the interviews?

Keywords: Gender-Based Violence, GBV Online, Sexual Harassment, Women Journalists, Women in the Media

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Terminology Note

We use the term 'man' or 'men' and 'woman' or 'women' instead of the terms male or female throughout the paper to respect the gender identity of our participants. Some of the women quoted in this piece are members of the LGBTQ community and are quoted based on their identity preferences as women. However, footnotes and quotes remain unaltered if the terms 'female' and 'male' are used to preserve their meaning in context.

In this report, we use the term 'media professionals' to include a range of professions including journalists, presenters, editors, podcasters, etc. The term is intended to be inclusive and recognize the roles of all levels of media support provided by women working in the field.

1. Introduction

The prevalence of gender-based discrimination (GBD)[2], gender-based violence (GBV)[3], and sexual harassment[4] is increasing among journalists and media professionals worldwide. This issue is particularly significant in post-coup Myanmar, where there is a lack of comprehensive research, as well as across the border from Myanmar, like Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, Thailand. In these places, there has been a lack of comprehensive research on the experiences of women media professionals. In response to this challenge, Myanmar Women in Media (MWiM) in October of 2023 conducted research focused on understanding GBD, GBV, and sexual harassment experiences among women journalists and media professionals in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. The research explores their experiences, obstacles, and potential remedies. The study's outcomes will serve as a foundational step for MWIM to support these women by identifying the distinct forms of discrimination they face. Moreover, evidence-based recommendations will support efforts to address their specific challenges. The research

[2] Gender-based discrimination, often referring to the loss of opportunities based on gender, can be understood as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on the basis of equality of men and women of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field" (United Nations. (1979). Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 1).

[3] Gender-based violence, often containing elements of power inequality, can be defined as "violence against women" as any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life" (United Nations. (1993). Deceleration on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, Article 1).

[4] Sexual harassment is "any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. While typically involving a pattern of behaviour, it can take the form of a single incident. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the opposite or same sex. Both males and females can be either the victims or the offenders" (United Nations Secretariat. (2008). Prohibition of discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority).

findings will be publicly disseminated to raise awareness among stakeholders and decision-makers about the critical situation. MWIM, consisting of experienced media professionals, is well-equipped to undertake this research initiative, which was conducted in collaboration with the Tea Leaf Center (TLC), a social enterprise in Thailand focused on research and research training. This endeavor strives to ensure that women journalists and media professionals not only excel in their careers but also experience safety and security in their work environments. Ultimately, these efforts contribute to their effective participation in the field while advocating for human rights and justice.

In the aftermath of the military coup in February 2021, many women journalists and women media professionals fled to Mae Sot along the Thai-Myanmar border, to Chiang Mai in Northern Thailand, or have gone in hiding within Myanmar. These women faced sexual harassment, exploitation, and gender-based discrimination and violence, both offline and online. A global rise in GBV against women journalists has been documented since 2021.[5] One in five journalists reported physical assault in connection with online abuse (Free Press Unlimited, n.d.). In Myanmar specifically, violence against journalists is well-documented,[6] however women journalists in Myanmar have less representation in the research data and within the field as a whole.[7] The Myanmar Women's Journalists Society (MWJS) suggests gender-based discrimination as a barrier to entry into the field, and those who do work in the industry face continual discrimination.[8] This is then compounded by the military coup and the violent crackdown on free speech. A few women journalists and media professionals have

[5] The Chilling a report produced by UNESCO, is a comprehensive global study on online GBV against female journalists. UNESCO. (2021). *The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists.*
https://webarchive.unesco.org/web/20220625110103/https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000377223
SecDev Foundation. (2022). *Female Journalists Organize Against Online Violence*. https://secdev-foundation.org/female-journalists-launch-response-to-online-violence/
Secdev Foundation. (2023). *Unpacking Women's Experience of Digital Violence: New Research.* https://secdev-foundation.org/new-research-dvaw-mena/

[6] Reporters Without Borders reported by the end of 2021, 115 journalists were arrested while covering news stories, 57 were detained arbitrarily, three were killed, and seven were confirmed to experience extreme torture. They also report that, as of January 1st, 2023, 68 journalists and 1 media worker are currently detained. https://rsf.org/en/figures-past-year-s-persecution-journalism-myanmar, https://rsf.org/en/country/myanmar

[7] Development Media Group reported in February 2023 "A gender gap persists among Myanmar media, with fewer women being employed in ethnic media and fewer women's voices being represented in media reports, according to journalists and women's rights activists. https://www.dmediag.com/news/5811-mratm

[8] Myanmar Women's Journalists Society reported on 62 female journalists throughout Myanmar. The report is the first research targeting female journalists in Myanmar independent of the global research conducted by UNESCO.

received emergency funds under the Safety Title,[9] an emergency fund for journalists made available by a collection of donors, but many others continue to struggle. In Thailand, women journalists face numerous daily gender-based discrimination challenges that prevent them from working professionally in their field. These women have no legal recourse to address these issues, as they must remain undocumented or hold only partial legal status in Thailand.

To date, only a handful of academic articles have explored gender-based discrimination in Myanmar media (Handunnetti & Phyu Lin, 2016; Aung, 2019; Tun, 2017). These have all been published either pre-2021 coup or as part of broader regional or global studies. The only publicly available comprehensive research conducted on women journalists in Myanmar is a UNESCO meta-study and an MWJS piece based on early 2022 data. Other data sources exist but are currently unpublished.

At present, no organizations are publicly conducting research focusing on GBV, GBD, and sexual harassment with these specific stakeholders. This research will be the first to specifically target women media professionals in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. This is significant because this group faces added risks and challenges created by being in this profession, being a woman, being in exile, and having precarious legal status. Unfortunately, this vulnerable situation has further marginalized women media professionals and has made them an easy target for those seeking to take advantage of them.

The purpose of this study is to support Myanmar Women in Media to enhance the status and well-being of women media professionals from Myanmar by conducting comprehensive research and awareness-building activities that address their challenges and advocate for their rights within the media industry. Myanmar Women in Media conducted preliminary research in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai to capture a snapshot of the current state of women in media, their challenges, and coping strategies as they relate to gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment to create actionable recommendations. This is not intended to be an academic review. Rather this is intended to be accessible with a focus on the findings and recommendations based on the findings.

2. Methods

Myanmar Women in Media used a mixed methodology approach, focused on key informant interviews (KIIs) and focus group discussions (FGDs). While the study focused on women in media professions, those selected for KIIs and FGDs were men, women, and LGBTQ members. Men and LGBTQ members were selected to participate in this study because gender-based violence against women does not occur in a vacuum (Messner et al., 2015) - nor should men and LGBTQ allies who support an end to gender based violence, discrimination, and sexual harassment be excluded from the dialogue (Tolman et al., 2019). LGBTQ members were selected to participate because they are often omitted from women focused studies despite women being members of LGBTQ communities. Furthermore, those that are transgendered

[9] The Safety Title was an emergency fund made available by a collation of donors. However, few female journalists were able to secure support through this joint fund.

may face uniquely different situations. Focus group discussions were separated into men and women's groups, with LGBTQ members participating in the group they chose to identify with. Additionally, due to the high risk and nature of the research, the selection process began with 'free prior and informed consent' before any data was gathered. This took the form of verbal consent. We conducted five FGDs with a total of 36 women and 20 men participants between both Mae Sot and Chiang Mai. We conducted eight KIIs to verify data collected in the FGDs. The KIIs represented a wide range of positions and job types within the media profession.

Focus group discussions were used within networks and organizations where participants had a familiarity with each other. This helped to ensure their safety and encourage open and honest discussion. Key informant interviews followed a semi-structured interview process. This allowed for deeper data gathering and ensured key information from focus group discussions could be verified and validated through targeted questioning. We used purposive sampling for the selection process to ensure the participants were a strong fit for the study. From there, we employed snowball sampling as a method of expanding our sample size. These methods are supported by Zickar and Kieth (2023), Bakkalbasioglu (2020), and Parker, Scott, and Geddes (2019) as methods useful for hyper-targeted populations and where informant access may be difficult due to socio-economics, risks, or other factors.

Snowball sampling was chosen for two primary reasons: first, there is a security risk inherent to informants by identifying them as both media professionals and as non-Thai nationals who have precarious legal status in Thailand. This combination means they are at higher risk if publicly identified. These sampling techniques reduce the risk of exposing individuals who may fall within these categories. Secondly, this study does not seek to draw broad sweeping conclusions about the state of women in media generally. Rather, the target group is a subset of women media professionals in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai – areas that have become the focus for independent Myanmar journalism in the aftermath of the coup. This methodology allows for data collection and analysis with targeted recommendations intended for subsets of a population. Furthermore, this ensures that our selection process maintains the security and safety of participants as the selection was made through known and established networks and key informants.

3. Research Questions

This research focused on three primary questions:

1. What are the main forms of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment experienced by women media professionals?
2. What coping strategies are currently employed by those facing gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment?
3. What are their current needs that will allow them to overcome gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment?

4. Findings

These findings are divided into the three primary questions for the research. We initially found that the definitions, application of the terms, and the concepts 'gender-based discrimination,' 'gender-based violence,' and 'sexual harassment' were inconsistently applied by many participants in both the women's and men's FGDs. The terms are well defined by the United Nations and other international bodies, however, in practice, these definitions are not well demarcated, and many descriptions of individual's experiences and their colleagues often overlap in categories. In many cases what was described did not fall neatly within a single category but rather held elements of each. Because of this mixing of terms and experiences, we chose not to separate the findings into gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. Instead, we organized the paper around the initial questions of the research. Then, we organized the report around the most common experiences found in the FGDs and KIIs.

4. Forms of GBD, GBV, and Sexual Harassment

What are the main forms of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment experienced by women media professionals?

Identity

Identity theft and fraud were consistently reported from both women's and men's FGDs and confirmed during the KIIs. We distinguished identity theft from fraud in this context because fraud focuses primarily on the action that occurred between the media house and the donor rather than the impact on the individual whose identity and reputation were taken. Participants reported that women journalists had their names or reputations used without their consent by media houses and those seeking grant funding. These reputations, built over many years, are likely significant enough to be important factors in funding decisions. According to the participants, this occurred in two primary ways. One way identity theft occurred was through media houses and individual editors applying for funding without their knowledge. They would apply for grant funding that targeted women from Myanmar, that had women-based funding requirements, or funding where the reputation of the women could be used to increase the chances for grant acceptance. In these cases, the women were unaware that the applications were made in their name. In a specific instance, the participant was refused a grant because they were unaware that their name had already been used for an application. They were also unaware that the funds had been disbursed to a media house using their name as the recipient. Fraud also occurs in a similar way. Women media professionals permit their name or reputation to be attached to an application with the understanding that they would be part of the project and receive funding for their work. However, after the grant was awarded, the women whose name was used on the grant were either removed from the funded projects or given less pay than originally agreed upon. The reason for this was often so the grant could fund other people rather than the women whose reputation was used.

> *In Mae Sot, all the media houses were trying to apply for grants to survive, […] media houses applied for grants under peoples' names without their permission.* – woman FGD participant

Unequal Opportunities

Many women reported unequal opportunities to conduct field reporting. Many participants acknowledged the inherent risk in reporting in conflict areas, especially the physical risks associated with crossing the border and engaging with a wide range of sources. However, many of the women participants described their requests to report on or follow leads across the border as actively getting rejected more frequently than their men counterparts. The KIIs confirmed this practice, as well. In many cases, the justification for rejecting these requests was that media houses had no protocol to protect the women in the field. Other reasons included concern for the reputation of the media houses or that of senior editors if women were harmed in the field by their decision. Therefore, rejecting women's requests were viewed as protecting them from harm.

> *They should not go into conflict areas because it is not safe. People say that because a woman is undocumented in the field, they are unsafe, but this does not apply to men.* – woman FGD participant

> *Sometimes going to the conflict areas, we depend on the armed groups, so sometimes these armed groups ride the motorbikes, and they have to carry someone on the back. This can be men. And before they get to the conflict areas, they sometimes need to spend a night somewhere before they get there, and so it is better for men to do this.* – man KII participant

Unsafe Interactions

Many women reported unsafe interactions with men while on the job and during other formal and informal work environments. Many women reported instances that included requesting personal contact information, unwanted staring at their bodies, unwanted touching, and asking for sex or threatening rape. However, unsafe interactions were not limited to experiences with their sources in the field. Unsafe interactions also included their men colleagues, senior journalists, and editors. While traveling with men colleagues, women often reported having to travel one-on-one either with a single man colleague or as the only woman among several men. It is important to note that in a few KIIs, traveling in a pair was described as policy necessary to reduce risk (in areas where men journalists have been frequently targeted).

Accommodations were also highlighted as a problem, as men and women were often expected to share the same spaces, including sleeping arrangements in the field. When traveling with men colleagues the conversation among the men was often inappropriate and included sexual harassment, comments about women's bodies, and conversations about sex. Furthermore, in at least three different FGDs, the participants mentioned having to travel as the only woman in the group and that many comments made were either directly targeting them, their women colleagues, or women junior staff members in their media houses.

> *While working at a new media house, because of the donor policy, they have to recruit women journalists, but the environment is not safe because men journalists are drinking alcohol and doing drugs, I stopped trusting those environments to work.* – woman FGD participant

Other examples of unsafe interactions were unwanted sexual advances. In many cases, this occurred outside of work hours at a bar or in other informal settings with men colleagues. Many participants, including the men's FGD and some of the KIIs, mentioned that senior journalists and editors often engaged in unwanted sexual advances. The participants reported that those in senior positions often tried to persuade their women juniors to have sex with them or their friends in exchange for promotions, salary raises, or to have their work published. Others reported that their women junior colleagues had been asked for sex in exchange for being hired, as a payment for housing, job security, and in a few cases as payment for safe passage out of Myanmar. Another notable example from the FGD was how drinking with colleagues led to unwanted sexual advances from their men colleagues. In one instance, this involved the higher management of a media house and his friends. In another instance, senior journalists invited a junior journalist for drinks and then tried to force her to engage in group sex, which included men working as human rights defenders. Therefore, women media professionals face unwanted sexual advances from their colleagues and contacts, even among those who purport to support human rights and media freedoms. These threats are compounded by the fact that women are, themselves, in vulnerable positions. They are seeking to escape Myanmar or dependent on media houses for their employment in exile in Thailand.

> *While meeting with a partner media group, they met at a restaurant. They were drinking, and the CEO of a media organization, despite having gender knowledge, was sexually harassing me. There was unwanted physical contact, like touching me intimately, and he said 'Can you get a motel with me?'* – woman FGD participant

> *They called a junior journalist to drink with them. After they were drunk, they verbally harassed her. They said "if you sleep with us, we will try and promote you" One of them is an editor. He said you have to sleep with my friends too. They wanted to have group sex. They were in the field and were all senior journalists and human rights defenders.* – woman FGD participant

These cases were also reported by the LGBTQ participants. Unsafe interactions were similar to the previously mentioned cases, with added insecurities of verbal and physical assault when advances were rejected. In some cases, the men's responses to rejection included derogatory terms and public shaming. In other instances, these interactions forced LGBTQ participants to become publicly outed.

> *Men [in the media sector] think 'it is really easy to get [LGBTQ] especially for sexual activity'. They will send me pictures of their private parts. And ask if I will have sex with them… They would be polite to me but then use derogatory terms behind my back* – transgender woman KII participant

Representation

Under-representation of women in field reporting roles and leadership roles within media houses was another common theme. Throughout the FGDs, both men and women participants stated there was a lack of women in leadership roles. Many participants said that leadership, especially in the senior editor positions and higher, was dominated by men. In the KIIs, some of the responses to this suggested a lack of qualified women to fill these positions. They suggested this, in part, because more women have not been able to securely leave Myanmar. On the contrary, many women said their opportunities to leave Myanmar for Mae Sot or Chiang Mai were hindered by their media houses' perception that men are more mobile. A common theme was that traditional gender-based responsibilities fell to the women, such as raising children or taking care of extended family, and thus men were freer to travel and leave the country. The gap then is made more evident by the trend of prioritizing men's mobility out of Myanmar.

> *Media founders are mostly men… my suggestion is more women founders and more women at higher level [positions].* – woman FGD participant

> *I have a child, my senior won't allow me to do my job because I have a child. They would say 'You shouldn't go due to the conflict area and being a mother.'* – woman FGD participant

> *Women are often asked 'If your child gets sick, can you do the work?* – women FGD participant

Participants also reported over-representation of women as presenters. There are multiple causes, with participants noting: a) the positions are lower paid and therefore given to women, b) women are selected on the basis of objectification, for their looks, and c) men refuse these positions because they are more public-facing and thus more dangerous for them in the field.

> *We encourage them but they reject it. They say they do not want to be a presenter. The men say the position is for female not for males.* – woman KII participant

> *Management keeps sending me unqualified presenters to train because they are pretty. They quit soon afterward because the pay is so low.* – man KII participant.

> *The main thing is that presenters are on the screen and they can be recorded by the military and added to a list [used by] the pro military supporters on social media and Telegram.* – man KII participant

Revenge

Revenge was another prominent theme in the discussions, as a means by which men in senior positions harassed women who were perceived as overstepping boundaries. Revenge took many forms, primarily reduced salary, not publishing articles, or harassment until they were driven to quit. In most cases, revenge against women in media was a direct result of women rejecting their senior's sexual advances. In other cases, revenge was a result of calling out senior-level or colleagues' behavior in public and to management. In the latter cases, the perpetrators were often friends with upper management. Because of this victim blaming and

being forced to quit their jobs, many participants were fearful to speak out. In more than one instance, revenge was a result of women being in relationships that their colleagues did not approve. Revenge also took the form of rumors and gossip by their co-workers.

> *Another person [I know] was harassed every night about news then when her male boss saw them with a partner, they stopped communicating with them [completely].* – woman FGD participant

> *This is about how the editors use power and physical control as punishment […] The editor would check their phone and check for photos* – man FGD participant

> *If a woman journalist has a good relationship with their editors, the male reporters will spread rumors about the female journalists* – woman FGD participant

One extreme case of revenge was reported during the FGD, where harassment turned into sexual harassment and had elements of violence. The participant, a woman media professional, had become a target of online abuse that turned to sexual harassment and physical violence. She confronted a colleague for his inappropriate sexual behavior in the workplace between the colleague and another woman. However, the colleagues involved did not perceive their behavior toward each other as harassment and accused the respondent of falsely pushing a narrative of sexual harassment. This led them and fellow journalists as well as their human rights defender friends to target this participant. The harassment included verbal and physical assault, online targeting, and a smear campaign against her. She was eventually forced to work from home and when they identified where she lived, she was forced to quit for safety concerns.

Social media was a common tool for sexual harassment. Harassment in this manner was through stalking-like behavior, obsessive calling and messaging, requests for sex, requests for nude photos, or sending photos of genitalia. Participants experienced this from their sources and their men colleagues. In work-related group chats and private messages, many participants described being targeted in public forums. Perpetrators would then use their contact information from these public spaces to private message the survivors. This situation was compounded by military propaganda, as the military had used Facebook and Telegram to spread misinformation about women media professionals.[10]

> *Earlier the military has the propaganda page on Facebook. They posted a picture of me saying I'm pregnant in the jungle* – women FGD participant

[10] Myanmar Witness with Sisters to Sisters published a report highlighting abuse and violence against women from Myanmar through the use of social media platforms. The military, as well as pro-coup, individuals were responsible for documented online harassment and offline physical attacks. Myanmar Witness. (2023). *Digital Battlegrounds: Gendered hate speech report on the politically motivated abuse of Myanmar women online*
<https://www.myanmarwitness.org/_files/ugd/e8f7c0_48cd6d5a341b490b843d05baf7f8d0a7.pdf>

> *When we had to work from home, we had to create Facebook groups for work. My peers would send inappropriate pictures because they have my information from the group.* – woman FGD participant

A different extreme case that came up in the FDG was when senior management (a man) was publicly called out for sexual harassment. He was publicly fired, and the donor was informed of the firing. In reality, the media house had not fired the perpetrator because they considered him too valuable to lose. He was also close friends with his superiors. The survivor was forced to continue working with the perpetrator until she quit for security reasons.

6. Coping Strategies

What coping strategies are currently employed by those facing gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment?

Very few strategies exist for coping with gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. The primary response from most of the women participants was simply to ignore the situation or allow a business-as-usual mentality. There is a huge fear of repercussions if they speak out. The same is true if they make a public scene. Furthermore, the participants made it clear that their priority was survival. Losing their jobs is not an option for many women because job opportunities are already scarce in Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, and returning to Myanmar as a journalist would entail living in extremely dangerous conditions.

> *Here it is really difficult to get job opportunities. That is why I must say that some people are compromising their professionalism… for the survival of their work. Even though they do not like what is happening, they do not have the opportunity to say they don't like the situation. They still have to work because they need the job.* – man FGD participant

While being fired from their job is a common worry that prevents people from speaking out, many of the participants have mentioned quitting their work as a way to cope. In nearly all instances of quitting their work, the cause was because the participants continued to feel unsafe in their work environments, due to either victim blaming or the continued employment of the perpetrator.

> *After reporting the situation, the violence experienced was not investigated. Instead of the perpetrator being investigated, the [survivor] was.* – woman FGD participant

Another strategy used by some was to share their experiences within their network of close women friends and colleagues. However, this appears to be limited in use according to the FGD participants and reported infrequently in the KIIs. The infrequent use of this coping strategy may partly be because of the growing difficulty of getting paid positions and the fear of revenge against them.

> *My senior management (a woman) is always gossiping about me using derogatory terms. She'll say things like 'I can fire this bitch at any time'. I was shocked. I had to ignore it and keep working. I cannot move to other organizations, and I can't go back home.* – woman FGD participant

According to the FGDs in both Mae Sot and Chiang Mai, the experiences of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment were fairly similar in both geographic spaces. However, there were significant differences in their sense of security. Chiang Mai participants faced underlying concerns of deportation, police threats, and job insecurity. However, in Mae Sot there appeared to be greater concern for deportation due to their inability to travel outside of Mae Sot as well as their physical proximity to the border, greater worry for interaction with police, and an increase in competition for jobs due to the city being both a staging point and final location for many leaving Myanmar. In Mae Sot specifically, these concerns appeared to be compounded by the risks of speaking up about experiences related to gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment.

> *[Compared to those Chiang Mai] especially in Mae Sot, there are no mechanisms in Mae Sot [to report these] because they are mostly illegal* – woman FGD participant

7. Current Needs

What are their current needs that will allow them to overcome gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment?

The following recommendations are based directly on the KIIs and FGD input. During all FGDs, these were the most commonly recommended responses to be addressed. These recommendations were also supported by the KII's as strategies for addressing gender-based discrimination, violence, and sexual harassment.

Reporting Mechanisms

Create multiple reporting mechanisms, including within media houses, an independent third-party non-media-connected reporting organization, and through the donor organizations that fund the media houses.

Participants stated that since the coup, there are no formal mechanisms they can use to address gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment within media houses or independent media professionals. The most-mentioned recommendation from the FGDs and the KIIs was to develop an effective reporting mechanism. Every FGD and KII provided this as a possible starting point for addressing gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment. The recommendation was to have multiple avenues through which a complaint can be filed. Mechanisms need to exist within the media houses and be made known to all staff members.

> *[Solutions should include a] complaint mechanism in the media houses and to donors* – woman FGD participant

> *Before the coup, you could go to the police. We could use the legal system. Now there is no mechanism.* – man FGD participant

Additionally, there was a near-unanimous agreement that an independent third-party reporting mechanism should exist. Many participants expressed concern that using any existing reporting

mechanisms carried the risk that the local staff and local human rights defenders would be too closely connected to the perpetrators to be effective. Their recommendation was for an independent third-party organization that is not connected to the media sector, as necessary to address the uniqueness of the current situation.

> *Create an independent body (3rd party). You can send the information to donor and Media house and also have a check and balance in human resources.* – woman FGD participant

> *Having [a] third party is the best, in our internal media house, the conflict is not resolved, they just stick on the wall but the issue is not actually addressed.* – man FGD participant

Finally, the participants requested a means to report discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence directly to donor organizations that is clear and understandable. This was especially requested for donors who had given money to projects where identity theft occurred and for donors who fund media houses where inadequate internal mechanisms exist. In nearly every instance of this recommendation, the participants are unaware if any mechanism already exists. Importantly, in two different FGDs, the participants who gave this recommendation had implicated the local staff members, through which the donors worked, as perpetrators of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and/or sexual harassment.

> *Create a mechanism and policy for complaints specifically to the donor and the donor should have a [communication] channel. – woman FGD participant*

Enforce Policies

Media houses and their donors should create and enforce policies to prevent gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment, including firing perpetrators and protecting those who speak out.

The second-most mentioned recommendation was for accountability within media houses. Many of the participants, both men and women, described a lack of accountability within their media houses. The KIIs suggested that some media houses had policies before the coup regarding discrimination, harassment, and gender-based violence, but restructuring and renewed insecurity have made existing policies secondary to other priorities and, in some cases, non-existent within the current operating environment. Responses in the FGDs suggest that the few media houses that have policies have failed to enforce them. Participants have recommended that media houses develop and enforce accountability policies. For example, they would like to see mechanisms in place to ensure perpetrators are expelled and removed from the media houses.

> *The media houses should have an anti-sexual harassment policy.* – woman FGD participant

> *I have experienced this discrimination. [My] colleagues always harass us. The media house I used to work [with had] fewer women. They accept the women but they don't accept LGBTQ.* – LQBTQ woman FGD participant

> *The other thing is that after we complain, the person who commit the violation, sometimes they get fired from the media houses but sometimes they are not.* – man FGD participant

> *The survivor was a reporter and spoke out on social media. Most people are watching this case and finally they had no choice but to announce that they fired the male editor. They said this on the news page, but he was not actually fired. Eventually the women quit the position. I think they want to keep the people as editors because they are powerful because they need senior roles. The senior team told the survivor that the senior position is important and we can't fire him.* – woman KII participant

Support Networks

Create a community support network with men and women that allows a space to speak out.
There is legitimate fear from the women participants around the idea of speaking out publicly. This is also true for women speaking out, specifically among other women. However one of the frequent recommendations from the FGDs was to develop and support a network where discussions and experiences can be shared among those they trust. Furthermore, the responses during the men's FGDs suggest that many are unaware to what extent gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment occur around them. Their participation in this research suggests a willingness to discuss and listen as well as an opportunity to find allies among the men media professionals. They also indicated a desire to better understand the situation and a wish for women to speak out more. For this to happen, there needs to be a safe space and a strong network where such discussions can take place among women media professionals and their allies.

> *Check and balance within the community, if the case happens this group or the other groups [can] encourage them to speak out. To help other [survivors]*. – man FGD participant

Trainings

Create targeted gender training that is context specific.
The FGDs suggested mixed opinions on the overall gender sensitivity knowledge of both men and women in the media sector. Many respondents did not have a specific definition of gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, or sexual harassment. Both men and women participants used a combined definition of the terms and concepts. This would suggest two things: firstly, more awareness and targeted training is needed for both women and men. Many of the women participants suggested that men simply did not understand their women colleagues' situations and they went on to suggest that men's behaviors that qualified as gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, and sexual harassment were simply done without their awareness. Others suggest that some men intentionally behaved in this way, as they were known to have participated in gender training. Furthermore, some respondents suggested that their juniors, especially junior women staff members, were often targeted but unaware of the situation until well after incidences occurred. Regardless of which combination of these situations is true, more specific training is needed.

Secondly, separating the experiences into strictly defined categories may not properly capture the full experiences of women in media. Gender training generally is useful but is not enough to ensure the uptake of knowledge on how gender-based discrimination, gender-based violence, or sexual harassment are understood on the ground. Organization-specific training is needed to also incorporate what these terms are and how they may appear in the field as well as how to address the problems, what mechanisms are in place to support survivors, and what the consequences are for violations.

> *Some men need sexual harassment awareness because they [behave] without knowing it is that.* – woman FGD participant

> *Some women don't know they are being abused, so [they] have to know about gender-based violence, discrimination, and harassment… [to learn] about women's rights and to connect with other women's organizations within the training.* – woman FGD participant

Equality in Hiring

Equality in position and authority as well as qualified hires.
Most FGD participants suggested more equality in the hiring process for upper management positions, including senior editors and editor-in-chief positions. It is important to note that some of our KIIs involved upper management women who oversaw teams of nearly 50% women-men. However, an overwhelming majority of participants in the FGDs suggest that this ratio of women to men is not commonly found in most media houses. Some participants suggested that they lacked hiring opportunities for higher-level positions while others suggested that having women leadership would provide them with a mechanism to lodge complaints. In one KII, this strategy was confirmed where a senior-level woman functioned as the focal point for sexual harassment complaints.

One hiring complaint dealt with the misuse of hiring requirements for grants. Some participants stated that many grants have a minimum women-to-men hiring ratio to receive funds. However, some media houses use this opportunity to hire unqualified women in lower-paid positions to save money.

> *The new MH grave incentives such as we will apply for the grant for you. […] but after receiving the grant, […] they only received small amounts per month because the pay range is too low. That is why those women complained and tried to quit from the job. The owner threatened them, saying if you leave no one will believe you.* – woman FGD participant

> *Said they would get payment from grant, but then changed their mind after [receiving] the grant.* – woman FGD participant

Mental Health

Mental Health support that is context-specific and independent.
A few participants suggested mental health support needs to be given to survivors. This was especially true for the Mae Sot participants. Some participants stated they distrust mental health

providers because they don't understand their specific context. Others stated that those who do know the context or who work with other Myanmar media professionals are closely networked with the perpetrators. However, many more suggested that they are simply unaware of this option.

> *The issue is of [the people] assessing mental health, they don't trust them and are worried they are worried they will share.* – woman FGD participant

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Farmer's Perception and Adaptation to Climate Change Impacts in Hakha Township, Chin State, Myanmar

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Abstract

Communities in Chin State are extremely vulnerable to climate change since both highland and lowland regions are exposed to it. Agriculture provides 90% of household income, and rural Chin families have traditionally relied on swidden agricultural production on marginal land to fulfill their food needs. They cultivate a small number of basic crops (usually millet and maize) with minimal inputs other than seed, human effort, and organic fertilizer. Aside from low profitability, insufficient diversification, and a significant reliance on loans, agricultural households face extra stress from soil erosion, irregular rainfall patterns, harsh temperatures, and commodity price volatility associated with climate change. In recent years, changing weather patterns and seasonal volatility have become a major barrier to crop production in Chin State's Hakha Township. This article examines how farmers view agricultural challenges caused by climate change, as well as the techniques they use to cope with and adapt their customary agricultural practices, using traditional knowledge. Based on household surveys and key informant interviews, I discuss how most farmers see climate change as a major impediment to their everyday livelihoods since they believe their agricultural productivity is significantly harmed, particularly by irregular rainfall.

1. Introduction

Myanmar is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change, ranking second out of 187 countries in the Global Climate Risk Index (Eckstein et al., 2021). Chin State is one of the most affected by climate change, such as floods and droughts, which occur due to erratic rainfall and have immediate and devastating consequences. Many people in Chin State rely on farming to support their livelihood needs. Increasing temperatures and irregular rainfall induced by global carbon emissions jeopardize Chin people's capacity to retain their traditional livelihoods. On top of this, Myanmar is now experiencing a deepening civil war because of a military coup in February 2021, and the subsequent escalation of conflict has had a devastating impact on the people's ability to respond and cope with the effects of climate change. Since the coup, many farmers in Chin State have struggled to secure their livelihoods because of the state's ongoing war against the revolutionary forces. Climate change and conflict, therefore, intersect in Chin State, Myanmar, in a mutually reinforcing way. The violence undermines local livelihoods in multiple ways, while climate change worsens the situation by threatening food security. For Chin people, these vulnerabilities are compounded by insecure land tenure, as they rely on

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customary land and forests for alternate food supplies and agricultural output. Climate change along with war exacerbate human insecurity among the poor and farmers.

Climate change is anticipated to have a detrimental influence on the four pillars of food security —availability, access, utilization, and stability—and their linkages (FAO et al., 2021). According to the IPCC (2023, p. 9) synthesis report, "Human-caused climate change is already impacting a wide range of weather and temperature extremes across the world resulting in broad negative repercussions on food and water security, human health, economics, and society, as well as associated losses and damages to environment and people. Vulnerable groups have historically contributed the least to present climate change and are disproportionately affected." In Chin State, people's vulnerability to climate change also intersects with issues related to the coup, including environmental degradation, and the climate change's effects on Hakha Township have become worse than in the past. More frequent landslides, the loss of farms and crops, health problems, a rise in temperature and insect infestations in crops and water shortages, and the devastation of homes, roads, and other infrastructure are all predicted effects of these climatic changes. Therefore, this paper discusses and examines how farmers in northern Chin State perceive climate change and its impact on their traditional livelihoods and agricultural productivity amid conflict.

2. Historical Background

Since Myanmar is placed second on the Global Climate Risk Index for its sensitivity to extreme weather events (MONREC, 2019, 2021), Chin state is one of the most affected by climate change, affecting its agriculture, fishing, and animal livelihoods (Hickey and Maria-Snub, 2022). Before the February 2021 coup, agriculture made a significant contribution to Myanmar's GDP. The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs' Nikita Bulanin (2023) stated that "it is likely that Myanmar's forest cover and its biodiversity will continue to decline as long as armed conflict continues and there are no spaces for civil society, including indigenous peoples' organizations, to constructively engage with the government on issues around climate change and adaptation to it as well conservation." Chin State is home to about half a million people, mostly ethnic Chin, whose livelihoods have traditionally revolved around subsistence farming of a small number of staple crops on frequently deficient soil and steep slopes as well as opportunistic trading with lowland populations in the nearby valleys below (Institute of Chin Affair, 2023; Mark, 2016). Rural Chin households historically relied on swidden agricultural production on marginal land to meet their food needs, growing a small number of staple crops (typically millet and maize) with no inputs other than seed, human labor, and organic fertilizer (Boutry et al., 2018; Solidarities International, 2010). Chin's beliefs in Christianity place a high value on the environment because their livelihood is entirely dependent on it. For example, before engaging in shifting agriculture, they perform a sacrifice rite for their gods to request that their gods protect their crops from bug infestation and provide them with a good crop. The households' access to resources for making a living and to assets for securing a livelihood are both limited, and most of their produce is consumed by themselves rather than sold to others. Despite the Chin people's limited experience with commercial agriculture, centuries of human activity have degraded the region's woods and grasslands (Mark, 2016). The undulating topography and height of Chin State make it particularly

vulnerable to severe soil erosion and land degradation. Rural Chin people are severely affected by climate change, and traditional subsistence farming practices are becoming more susceptible to climate change.

Tin Yi (2012) states since 1977, the temperature and drought risks have increased, normal monsoon breaks became weaker and disappeared in the 1990s, and the monsoon depression became less significant in the 1980s and 1990. The annual rainfall quantity in Chin has a humid subtropical, dry winter climate. The city's annual temperature is 22.29ºC (72.12ºF), which is -4.73% lower than Myanmar's average. Chin receives an average of 140.73 millimeters (5.54 inches) of precipitation each year, with 172.16 wet days (47.17% of the time). In Hakha township, the weather reaches the highest at 29.4 ºC and the lowest at – 4.0 ºC. The country's susceptibility to environmental deterioration and climatic change has increased due to conflict and ongoing civil war. Ethnic minorities are particularly vulnerable to climate change "due to their resource-based livelihoods and the location of their homes in vulnerable environments" (Wildcat, 2013, p. 509), as well as poverty and marginalization (Ramos-Castillo et al., 2017). Food security and livelihoods in communities affected by war have been negatively impacted by the vital agricultural industry being damaged by rising violence and climate-related disasters since the military took power in 2021 (Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, 2024). Since daily livelihoods rely heavily on hydro-climatic conditions, agriculture is especially vulnerable to extreme weather events, rising temperatures, and precipitation changes (Tun Oo, 2018).

This research focuses on the perception of climate change's impact on farmers, using the notion of slow violence in Hakha township in Chin State. Hakha is known as the Capital of Chin State and all the state administration is in place – the headquarters of all offices are available. Hakha Township has a total population of 49,497 people (Census, 2014). Ground nuts, sesame, sunflower, sugarcane, maize, banana, and elephant foot yam are the major crops grown in Hakha Township. According to data from Hakha Township's meteorology department (2015-2017), the average rainfall in Hakha Township is 2,619 mm, with December having the lowest average rainfall at 0 mm. It also has a lower average temperature than regions below 1,500 meters. The average yearly temperature is 17°C, with January being the coldest month at 9.4°C and July being the warmest at 20.3°C. According to the Hakha meteorology department's study (average of 2015, 2016, and 2017), the rainy season lasts from mid-May to mid-October, when 94% of the average annual precipitation occurs. The vegetative cycle of crops planted by farmers on paddy terraces and shifting cultivation plots occurs during this season, which lasts from mid-October to mid-February. The winter season is the coldest time of year and the start of the dry season. It falls around the time of most yearly crop harvests. The study by the Myanmar Institute for Integrated Development (MIID, 2014) in northern Chin State showed that due to longer and hotter dry/hot seasons brought on by climate change, there is a greater risk of devastating loss of agriculture products and forest fires in the pine trees.

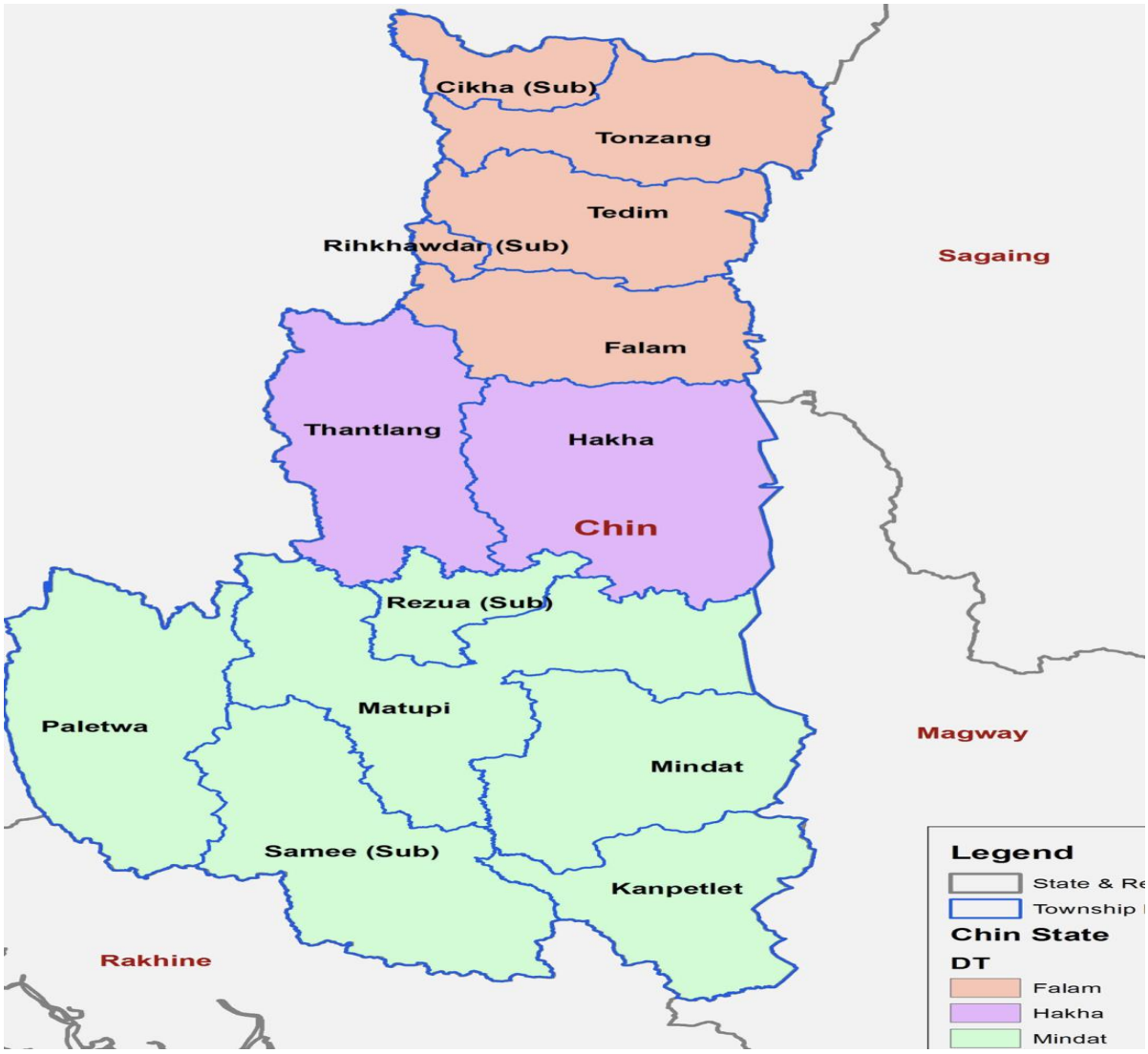

Figure 1: Chin state township map. Source: UNDP, Chin state's comprehensive 5 years development plan and annual planning 2016-2021.

Chin State was annexed by the British Empire in 1886 by the Chin Hills Regulation Act. In the 1940s and 1950s, rice was first introduced to people in Hakha but was only available to wealthy families. The cultivation of upland paddy was only permitted on the plots of wealthy nobles; lower classes had to travel to major townships to trade goods for rice or make purchases. Land within lopils (plots/fields) was part of a communal pool, or by customary law, noble households owned more land than was necessary for their household food consumption. On a section of the land owned by noble households, who are permitted to share the land under customary law, paddy terraces were constructed. Therefore, these areas were not available for other households to practice shifting cultivation anymore. The study on the social structure of the Chin Society by anthropologist F.K Lehman in the 1950s argued that "shifting cultivation and home gardens generally provided enough for the annual household consumption and that food shortages were rare" (Lehman, 1963, p. 58). However, when the Burmese military gained control of the Chin Hills in 1962, the agricultural landscape of Chin changed dramatically. Ne Win introduced the "Burmese Way to Socialism," which included a paddy quota system that had a significant

impact on farming communities and the "compulsory delivery system," in which each farmer was given a specific amount of paddy based on the size of his paddy holdings, yield per acre, family size (Boutry et al., 2018). In addition, Chin farmers were encouraged to migrate from swidden cultivation to permanent farming, a transition associated with rural development in Myanmar policy circles (Htike, 2017; Phyo, 2015). However, Chin people largely continued to follow the customary land governance system in which land was owned communally, and there was no private land in shifting cropping zones (Boutry et al., 2018).

The Chin people continue to live, for the most part, autonomously from the state, relying on local agriculture and customary systems for daily government. However, the coup and the subsequent fighting, which has engulfed much of Chin State, have dramatically altered people's livelihoods. The Chin people's food and livelihood security are in jeopardy due to both the coup and the growing consequences of climate change. Farmers in conflict-affected areas are unable to work and confront food security issues and the impacts of climate change. Following the coup, the Chin had the highest food insecurity rate, with 30% of families reporting no food in 2021, up from 9% in 2020. The situation of nutrition and food security in Myanmar was assessed using seven rounds of nationally representative household panel data collected between July 2024 and December 2021. Overall, Myanmar's nutrition and food security situations deteriorated between 2021 and 2024. The IFPRI survey (2024) revealed Between April and July 2024, more than 3% of families faced moderate to severe hunger, with the highest rates recorded in Chin (14.4 percent), Rakhine (8.0 percent), and Kayah (5.2 percent). The proportion of households with low food consumption increased from 9.4% in December 2021-February 2022 to 17.7% in April-June 2023 and 13.5% in April-July 2024. In April-July 2024, Kayah had the highest share (52.3%), followed by Chin (33.9%) and Shan (21.1%) (International Food Policy Research Institute, 2024). Farmers' agricultural concerns are influenced by their socioeconomic condition. This paper will look at the Chin people's traditional subsistence agricultural livelihoods and examine how they perceive and respond to the effects of climate change during conflict. After the coup in 2021, Chin state was transformed into a revolutionary war zone. The primary purpose of the Chin's arms was to oppose the military regime and establish the Federal Union. The civil war between the Chin armed groups, which is becoming worse every day in the state, has made it more difficult for people to adapt to climate change because many farmers have been forced to flee, leaving their fields and agricultural land vacant. As outlined below, this paper will focus on how farmers attempted to respond to climate change despite the immense challenges posed by the current political situation and rapidly evolving conflict.

3. Statement of the Research Problem and Justification

Climate change is a global environmental concern with a significant impact on agricultural output and some negative repercussions for humanity, including a direct impact on food security (Enete & Onyekuru, 2016). Climate change, including rising temperatures, will have a huge influence on the global economy (Ozturk, 2017; Fahad & Wang, 2020), causing soil degradation, famine, and food insecurity (Knox et al., 2012; Giri et al., 2021). Similarly, the IPCC warns that in conflict-affected countries, the effects are exacerbated and leaves limited room for response and adaptation. People's ability to cope with these changes is also directly

related to politics and local governance. Chin State serves as an example of the difficulties and strengths of the farmer's capacity to adapt to climate change in the face of conflict. The standards of individual farmers, such as their level of agricultural experience, can also have a significant impact on how people perceive and respond to climate change. Climate change impacts are more severe in poor regions due to low adaptive capacity (Bello et al., 2013; Song et al., 2022). Deforestation in Chin State has exacerbated climate

change and recurrent floods by increasing surface runoff and soil erosion caused by the loss of plant root systems, which act as a natural glue for the eroding ground (DVB, 2017). Customary farming livelihoods in Chin farmers are also threatened by state-level policies that view traditional shifting cultivation livelihoods negatively (Boutry et al., 2018). Kerkhoff and Sharma (2006) argue that shifting cultivation not only supports the livelihoods of ethnic minorities and the poor and marginalized communities but also contributes to biodiversity conservation and maintenance of agriculture and forest preservation. Szott, et al., (1999) and Mertz et al. (2009) argue shifting cultivation is a diversified livelihood system that is effective in the conservation of biodiversity and sustainable management of soil and water resources. Shifting cultivation is deeply ingrained in the local community life for the Chin people, both culturally and socially (Boutry et al., 2018; Mark, 2016). However, many agronomists and ecologists regard shifting agriculture as destructive to the forest and dangerous to the planet's future (Bahuchet & Betsch, 2012).

Farmers in Chin are unable to access farmlands due to landmines and explosive ordnance, and the junta military has imposed travel restrictions that have delayed and disrupted the flow of food supplies and trade, making adaptation more difficult for farmers. Sagaing and Magwe generate many agricultural items that are exported to the Chin people. However, farmers in various locations of Sagaing and Magwe are unable to cultivate their crops owing to the civil conflict (Frontier, 2023). The army's presence in Chin State increased dramatically from one to ten battalions in 1990, accompanied by massive loss of traditional lands and the flight of many Chins to India and other countries to avoid slave labor and other violations of their rights by the military (Human Rights Watch, 2009). The coup in 2021 exacerbated the impact of the civil war on the Chin people; thousands of houses were torched by the military regime, and thousands fled to Mizoram, India. A female Chin community leader reports that the impact of conflict on the climate has been worse than in past years, owing to the impact of airstrikes on the terrain and smoke from burning structures. Therefore, this study examines how farmers in Chin State perceive and respond to the effects of climate change during a civil conflict as well as the relationship between traditional shifting agriculture and local adaptability. As detailed below, this study uses qualitative research to investigate the Chin farmers' knowledge and perceptions of climate change, as well as the local methods they are using to respond to these changes.

4. Research Questions

1. What are the major factors impacting Chin people's reliance on shifting cultivation?

2. Do Chin farmers perceive shifting cultivation as a reliable source of food security as seasonal temperature and rainfall become less predictable?

3. How have changing temperatures and seasonal variability in Chin State impacted the farmers' reliance on subsistence farming for their livelihoods?

5. Research Objectives

1. To examine farmers' perceptions of climate variability and its impacts on customary livelihoods.

2. To determine the factors influencing farmers' awareness of climate change.

3. To examine farmers' adaptation strategies to climate change and the constraints in implementing them.

6. Literature Review

6. 1. Farmer's Perception of Climate Change

Climate change poses a significant threat to human security through various environmental changes, including coastal erosion, reduced precipitation, declining soil moisture, increased storm intensity, and species migration (McCarthy, Leary, Dokken, & White, 2001). Climate change has become one of the most important environmental influences on farmland degradation, with the potential to undermine household food security (Rasul, 2021; Fan & Rue, 2020; Harvey et al., 2018). Bates et al. (2008) state the prevalence of extreme climatic events and unpredictable rainfall patterns results in more frequent and severe droughts and floods. Global food insecurity has already increased, owing mostly to climate change (World Bank, 2022).

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014) has highlighted the severe impacts of climate change in Southeast Asia, including rising temperatures and altered precipitation patterns, particularly in low-income communities such as Chin (Hung et al., 2010). A recent study on climate risk in Myanmar predicts that the climate will fluctuate significantly in the coming decades and cause more disasters (Mi Mi Tun, 2022). In addition to rising temperatures, a shift from a bimodal to an unimodal pattern in the rainfall distribution has been seen, leading to shorter rainy seasons (105 days compared to 145 days) and a later start to the monsoon season (Lwin, 2010). Drought is regarded as the country's most serious natural hazard because of its impacts on property, assets, and livelihoods (Hickey & Maria-Snub, 2022).

Myanmar is also the country that suffered the most from extreme weather occurrences between 2000 and 2019, owing largely to the military government's disastrous mishandling of Cyclone Nargis in 2008 (Eckstein et al., 2021). A rise in individual catastrophes related to floods and cyclones has been observed recently across the country. For example, in May 2023 Cyclone Mocha wreaked havoc in Rakhaing and Chin States, destroying homes, religious structures, educational institutions, and people's fields (Mi Mi Tun, 2021; UNICEF 2023). In Chin State, for example, rainfall was 30% higher in the last seven days of July 2015 than in any other month in the previous 25 years, causing significant devastation from landslides. Farmers' attitudes toward climate risk have a significant impact on how they manage climate-related risks and opportunities, and the specifics of their behavioral reactions to these attitudes

influence the available adaptation options, process involved, and results of the adaptation (Adager et al., 2009). If farmers do not perceive climate change as a significant threat, they are more unlikely to undertake adaptive actions (Arbuckle et al., 2015). Yarzar Hein and Kampanat Vijitsrikamol (2019) studied irrigated and rain-fed agricultural households in Myanmar and found that 85% of farmers perceived climate change as changing rainfall and temperature trends.

It has been described in numerous instances that farmers are aware of and able to observe long-term changes to rainfall patterns and temperature in their daily lives (Ndamani & Watanabe, 2015; Kusakari et al., 2014). Farmers are motivated to respond to climate change, take precautions based on their experiences, knowledge, and perceptions of extreme climatic occurrences and their effects, and decide whether to adopt adaptation strategies (Siegrist & Gutscher, 2008; Kreibich, Müller, & Merz, 2007). Colson and Raffaelli (2014) argue farmers' perceptions of climate change are crucial to their farm management, particularly in terms of risk perception, as they noted that farmers who understood climate change were aware of its negative effects and could anticipate long-term agricultural risk related to it. Climate change perception is strongly related to the degree to which climate-induced risks and opportunities affect the farmers and their livelihoods, and their responses and adaptation strategies are based on perception (Ndamani & Watanabe, 2015). The local perception and observations may also reflect real climate change impacts (Laidler, 2006) as well as regional concerns (Danielsen, Burgess, & Balmford, 2005). Farmers' perceptions of change are also influenced by their exposure, resilience, and adaptive skills (Ndamani & Watanabe, 2015).

A study conducted in Vietnam and Thailand by Hermann Waibel and Thi Hoa Pahlisch (2013) highlights that farmers recognize climate change, yet their characterizations differ based on geographic factors. For example, in Vietnam, perceptions are shaped by individual characteristics, regional variables, and recent climatic events. In contrast, there is notable variation in how farmers in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia perceive and respond to climate impacts. In Cambodia, a study by Venkatappa, Sasaki, Han, and Abe (2021) found that the country experienced the highest frequency of severe droughts between 2015 and 2019. Vietnamese farmers in group discussions reported severe droughts and heat waves in 2021, indicating an increase in the prevalence of climate hazards. Indigenous communities viewed the retreat of glaciers as a sign of divine retribution rather than environmental change (Allison, 2015). Similarly, in the Andes, fluctuations in temperature are seen as the wrath of the mountain deity 'Mama Cotacachi' (Rhodes, Zapata, & Aragundy, 2008). For some communities, disasters such as flooding and drought are also interpreted as results of the sins of people and disrespect to God (Kusakari et al., 2014). For example, smallholder farmers in Ethiopia considered climate change to be a direct result of humanity's punishment due to disobedience and unfaithfulness to God's rules (Debela et al., 2015). The poor, particularly those in developing countries, are projected to be disproportionately affected by climatic variability and change, necessitating the most effective adaptation techniques. In some countries, farmers are adapting to climate change by altering crop combinations and implementing new technologies in response to changing climate and economic conditions (Molua & Lambi, 2006). However, there is a growing body of knowledge that highlights the importance of traditional agricultural practices in response to climate change. Below, I outline

studies of shifting cultivation, an agricultural practice that is widely practiced among the Chin people of Myanmar.

6.2. Shifting Cultivation Practices

Research from other parts of the world demonstrates the importance of traditional Indigenous agricultural practices to respond to climate change, Throughout Southeast Asia, swidden agriculture remains a substantial source of local livelihoods and food security (C. Erni, 2015). Shifting cultivation is practiced by most people living in rural upland areas in Myanmar, which is crucial for their food security and livelihood, according to estimates of the area of land used for shifting agriculture (Boutry et al., 2018; POINT, 2015). While it is now widely recognized that shifting cultivation, when well-managed, can be beneficial to both communities and the environment, it had been seen as environmentally destructive for decades before (Cairns, 2015; Choudhury, 2021). Indeed, the Myanmar Forest Policy (MFP) of (1995) includes a directive to "discourage shifting cultivation practices that cause extensive damage to the forests by adopting improved practices for better food production and quality of life for shifting cultivators." It is a common misconception that shifting cultivation is the primary cause of deforestation. Shifting cultivation is not the main cause for deforestation because throughout the fallow period all fallow lands are replanted with trees and sufficiently regenerated to allow for subsequent cutting about seven or eight years later. Instead, logging, road construction, the creation of industrial zones, and dam construction significantly contribute more to deforestation. Lori Ann Thrup et al. (2007) argue that the Myanmar government should recognize the diversity, rights, culture, and traditional knowledge of shifting agriculture, as well as leverage the important experience and knowledge of Indigenous communities in carrying out development programs. Boutry et al. (2018) argue that the advantages of preserving indigenous agricultural methods, such as shifting cultivation, could also lessen the consequences of climate change.

In Burmese, shifting cultivation is called "*shwe pyaung taung ya*" which means "moving hill farm," or (hill farm). Shifting cultivation is a traditional form of agriculture often associated with Indigenous and ethnic minority communities in Myanmar, in which plots of land are cultivated and then left to regenerate in subsequent years by leaving the fields fallow for long periods (5-10 years). Shifting cultivation is the predominant agricultural system in upland areas of Chin State. Derek A. Smith argues that paddy and other crops grown through shifting agriculture benefit the ecosystem and wild environments, and also provide food for the animals (Smith, 2005). Similarly, Ngan Tang Gun argues Myanmar's shifting farming technique is not harmful to the environment but benefits it because, during the shifting cultivation harvest season, a variety of jungle birds and wild animals enjoy eating the abundant crops (Ngan Tang Gun, 2009). Indeed, shifting cultivation is "an ideal solution for agriculture in the humid tropics as long as the human population density is not too high and fallow periods are long enough to restore soil fertility" (Erni, 2015, p. 8). Shifting agriculture also conserves crop diversity and improves adaptability by producing a diverse range of food all year round, as well as a healthy diet rich in micronutrients, allowing one to meet all food security criteria at the same time. Additionally, shifting agriculture does not significantly contribute to deforestation when it is administered according to a customary system (Cowan, 2015). Villages with better land

management techniques, higher decision-making abilities, agricultural diversification, and good market access had better adaptability to climate change. In conclusion, shifting agriculture plays a vital role in the survival of ethnic culture, heritage, religious beliefs, and the livelihoods of nature-oriented hill farmers.

Most of the countries in Asia, such as India, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, and Myanmar recognize shifting cultivation as unproductive and harmful to the environment (Kerkhoff & Sharma, 2006). They perceive shifting cultivation as illegal and as the main cause for deforestation and climate change. These policies and actions by governments that cause forcible population displacements without their consent infringe on human rights to land. Indeed, many indigenous tribes wish to settle in their traditional and ancestral locations while responsibly managing the rich local and natural resources. Dispossession of their ancestral lands and restriction of access to forests and other natural resources, such as shifting agriculture, are some of the primary causes of poverty. They argue that many ethnic minorities and indigenous groups are ascribed negative attributes, including being described as primitive, backward, disloyal to national sovereignty and security, a hindrance to national progress, and so on (IWGIA, AIPP, & IKAP, 2009). Shifting farming is a land use form that upland peoples have used sustainably for millennia to meet their food needs while also preserving biodiversity as part of their cultures and way of life, which is inextricably related to their traditions, lifestyles, and livelihoods. IWGIA, AIPP & IKAP examined deforestation and found that agricultural intensification as well as small-scale and large-scale forest conversion into industrial plantations are the causes of carbon emissions. On the other hand, shifting cultivation is self-regenerating.

Despite the diversity of cultures and lifestyles, many indigenous peoples in Asia have close relationships with their lands and practice shifting cultivation to produce enough food for self-sufficiency, promoting food security. Like other Indigenous peoples, the Chins regard shifting agriculture as a means to ensure their food security and livelihood (Boutry et al., 2018; Mark, 2016). In the Chin setting, spatial structure of shifting cultivation at the village level is also embedded in strong communal social ties. Every household in the village that participates in the shifting cropping cycle cultivates the same *lopils* (plot). Rotational ginger fields, permanent vegetable gardens, and fruit orchards (mangoes, strawberries, bananas, citrus) are all included. All the plots are privately owned, the villagers share the plots in the village meeting, and they manage the land communally. Each village is made up of several clans, and clans share land among themselves and share other plots with families of other clans even outside the village (Hung Mana, 2014). It is customary within the Chin community for farmers to perform shifting cultivation on previously fallowed land to acquire access to the land for a certain purpose. However, since the colonial period, shifting cultivation has been perceived by the state as an "unproductive" form of agriculture that destroys forests (Bryant, 2009). As a result, unsustainable resource-use practices are becoming more common and are adding pressure on resources, thus threatening the very basis of their livelihoods.

7. Research Methodology

7.1. Conceptual Framework

This study examines the traditional agricultural practices of the Chin people, who have shared land for farming for the majority of their forefather's lifetime. The first argument aims to assess the influence of climate change on farmer livelihoods in terms of crop production by comparing the past to the present, as well as how they have managed it by changing plants, seeds, or cultivation methods. It also explores how the Chin people have adapted to climate change and their perception of it as well as how climate change has affected their way of living and agriculture, all within the framework of Myanmar's recent civil conflict. The key point here is the struggle against climate change and its influence in the midst of the state's conflict and civil war. Moreover, farmers are confronted with many risks and difficulties when managing their fields and security. Apart from assessing the impact of temperature and seasonal variability on the ability of Chin farmers to secure their food livelihoods from subsistence farming, the research examines the perceptions of Chin farmers regarding the effects of climate change, including reduced soil fertility, erratic precipitation, and scarcity of crop water. Finally, this paper explores how the Chin people's ability to respond to climate change is deeply impacted not only by the current civil conflict but also by decades of persecution and state-led structural violence (see Figure 2).

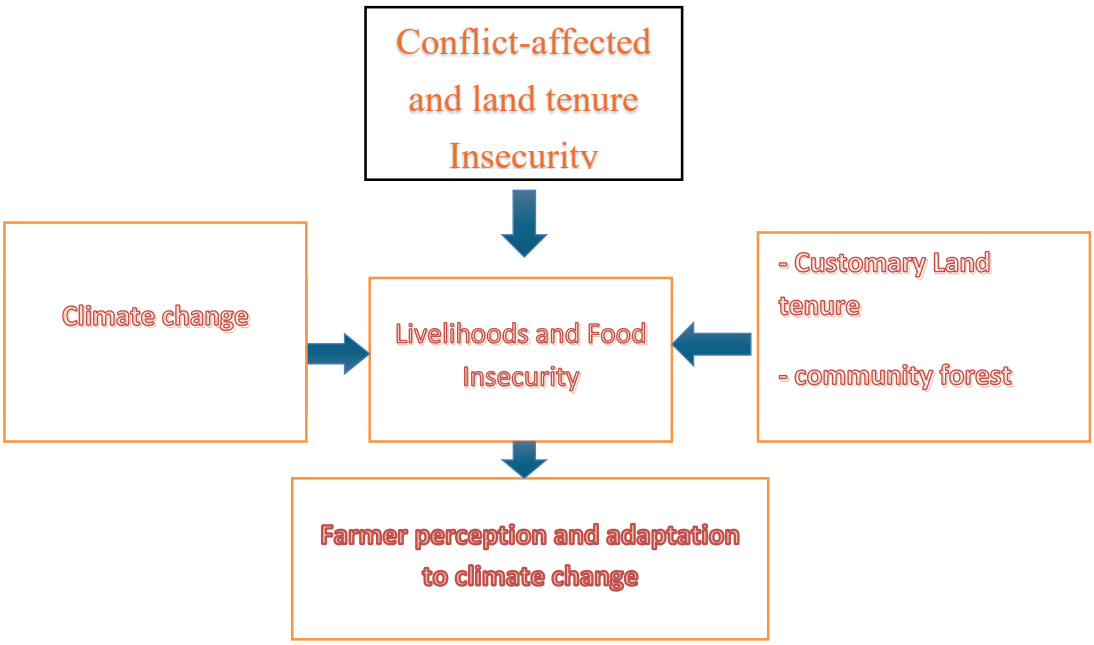

Figure 2: Conceptual framework

7.2. Site Selection

This study focuses on Hakha Township in Chin State, which is regarded as one of the most affected by climate change. Furthermore, there hasn't been much research into the effects of climate change on Hakha and their traditional techniques of shifting farming. This is owing, in part, to decades of military control that limited scholars' access to the country, particularly in ethnically conflict-ridden regions. Access to research increased during the reform period

(2011-21); but following the 2021 military coup, Chin State became even more inaccessible. Due to the ongoing civil war between the revolutionary forces and Myanmar's military, road conditions worsened, and significant security risks increased for tourists. The Chin community were displaced due to the fighting and lacked access to education, healthcare, and other means of subsistence, making them vulnerable to climate change.

7.3. Research Site

The study was done in regions of the Hakha Township in northern Chin State, which is one of the most sensitive areas to climate change and has long suffered from the unpredictable rain and changing temperature (Figure 3, Hakha town map). This study aims to explore how Chin farmers perceive climate change, as well as how climate change affects their livelihoods, particularly during this civil war. It also investigates climatic variability and climate change in Hakha Township, considering that the bulk of the residents have traditionally relied on shifting cultivation farming techniques as their primary source of income. Due to travel limitations and security concerns for both the respondents and the researcher, who is situated in an unsafe environment, the precise locations of the places are not indicated on the map. Semi-structured interview questions were prepared in English and translated into the local dialect. In addition, farmers in Hakha township were asked follow-up questions via social media platforms like Zoom, Messenger, Viber, and Signal.

Most Hakha township dwellers are known as the *"lai"* tribe among the Chin, and agriculture is their primary source of income. (See Fig. 3, Hakha township map). In the villages where the study took place, there are several species of wild creatures, including deer, bears, wild pigs, rabbits, foxes, monkeys, and serows, which are common in the area. Hakha also has a diverse bird population, and many people continue to hunt wild animals and fish in the waterways for their food and livelihood needs. The forests contain rich timber species such as mountain teak and pine. There is wild bamboo, cultivated bamboo, and other trees suitable for construction. The woodland is abundant in orchids and wild yams. Yam is cultivated in the hamlet as a cash crop, and it has recently become the village's main source of revenue. Many people in this area rely on agriculture for their livelihood despite the challenges presented by climate change since they have no other means of subsistence. All the villagers continue to practice shifting agriculture, and they are well-versed in land use, including the location and properties of various shifting cultivation regions, forest areas, and watershed areas.

Village A is located in the lowlands of Hakha township. The village has approximately 35 households. Most of the villagers' income and livelihood come from agriculture, including growing seasonal crops like grapes, parsley, and bananas - which they primarily sell in the market. Before the landslide in 2015, most villagers relied on paddy cultivation for their income and survival; however, the landslide destroyed all the paddy fields near the riverbank. While some farmers were able to relocate their rice fields (within the former village land), climate change and rain irregularities influenced paddy output since they were unable to plant on time, resulting in the decline of production. Another difficulty for village A was the impact of a military takeover in 2021, which prevented them from going to town to sell their products at the market. People in Village A have also been impacted long-term by conflict and violence. Many people described feeling stuck in the middle of the Chin revolutionary forces and the

military - the villagers have experienced extortion from both sides. As a result of their affiliation with the revolutionary forces, the villagers experienced torture and human rights abuses from the 1990s onwards. However, as the country opened, Chin lands became exposed to land grabs in the form of foreign investment and development. These dynamics all impacted the people's livelihoods and land tenure security.

Village B is in the hills, which has a significant impact on water scarcity. The community includes about 35 households. Strawberries (for sale) and other vegetables cultivated for home consumption are the most common agricultural operations. Before strawberry farming, the locals relied heavily on charcoal manufacture, which was required to consume trees. Only 2-3 families depended on paddy farming because the ground was steep and unsuitable there. In comparison to Village A, the 2015 landslide had a less severe impact, but the military coup in 2021 made it impossible for farmers to travel to Hakha to sell their strawberries. Most households rely on remittances. However, remittances are insufficient to meet their food and livelihood requirements, and many people rely on subsistence cultivation for food.

Figure 3: Hakha town Map. Source: Google map

7.4. Data Collection

Twenty farmers (ten female and twenty male) aged 40 to 66 years old who work in agriculture and have been affected by climate change due to increased temperatures and erratic rainfall in their region were questioned. Due to the insecurity in Myanmar, the researcher was unable to personally attend the research location; thus, an assistant helped conduct the interview. Interviewees were questioned about their views on climate change, its implications on agricultural commodities, and their personal experiences with it. The questionnaire was prepared and discussed with the research assistant in November 2023, as well as with members of a research team based in Denmark, Myanmar, and Thailand. The data-collecting period ran from December 10, 2023, to February 15, 2024. However, the field assistant was not able to collect data continuously due to travel limitations and frequent cut-offs of internet connection

by the military. Semi-structured interviews serve as the main means of collecting data. Interviewees were guided through the main research questions using semi-structured interviews. The research also adheres to the protocols of a comprehensive case study, which aids in comprehending the households' living conditions; perceptions and emotions regarding the impact of climate change on their agricultural production; their management practices for their cultivation plot; their historical uses of their forest, land, and natural resources; and their awareness of the consequences of climate change on their way of life and their emotional response regarding its impact. Key informants' interviews were also conducted with village elders who had long engaged in or practiced shifting cultivation farming. The researcher and assistant communicated over Viber and interviews were sent to the researcher via voice note, which were subsequently transcribed and translated from the Hakha Chin language into English. Consequently, after gathering data, the researcher analyzed the data and held some follow-up interviews.

7.5. Secondary Data

Secondary data on the "impacts of Climate Change, yearly temperature, and rainfall record" was gathered from online and offline sources, including the Department of Meteorology and Hydrology in Hakha. Additionally, information was gathered from local media and research undertaken by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) that are actively concerned with environmental issues.

7.6. Security and Ethics

Due to current political conflicts in Myanmar, particularly in the research location, the interviewees' biographies and backgrounds are not provided for security reasons. As a result, respondents and study regions are identified using pseudonyms. In addition, the exact area of the villages is not mentioned. The researcher and research assistant took significant care throughout the research process to secure the privacy and safety of participants. Initially, the researcher planned to go to Chin State to conduct the interviews in person in November 2023. However, the road that connects Hakha to Sagaing region was closed by the Chin army due to the conflict with the Myanmar military. As a result, data gathering was carried out from beginning to end with the help of an assistant.

8. Findings

Farmers have viewed rising temperatures, floods/landslides, droughts, and irregular rains as unproductive harvests. Landslides and natural catastrophes were particularly noted following uninterrupted rain in 2015. Farmers believe that after the 2015 tragedy, landslides and floods occurred every rainy season. Landslides are one of the most significant issues that Chin farmers confront in terms of agricultural effect. The increase in temperature is one of the facts most farmers perceived, and among the interviewees, 99% mentioned the temperature was warmer compared to the last two decades. For example, there was a lot of snow in the 2000s. However, farmers responded that they don't experience snow anymore, and it has become so warm that the farmers cannot even grow certain kinds of plants due to the heat. They noticed there had been a decrease in the number of rainy days, increase in the number of hot days, increase in

heat temperature, and a decline in the number of chilly days. Based on the interviews conducted, farmers in the study regions felt that the most significant difficulty facing them was the unpredictable rainfall. In the past, people could produce crops on time and maintain their livelihood and food security since the rains were consistent. Another observation was that water sources were drying up, which is affecting their paddy fields as well as cropland for irrigation.

Farmers have modified their agricultural operations in reaction to perceived changes. Traditional agricultural processes are being transformed into garden cultivation. Farmers choosing revenue crops are focusing on cultivating vegetables rather than maize and millet and converting highland farming into wine, *kamphe* (coriander), and strawberry gardens. Also, limestone mining is replacing charcoal production. More scientific investigation should look into hill farmers' agricultural diversification strategies. Crop diversity can increase production while improving ecosystem sustainability. Shifting agriculture, an age-old tradition, is vital to preserving ethnic culture, heritage, religious beliefs, and the livelihoods of nature-loving hill farmers. It also promotes ecological balance and deepens the relationship between community, environment, and development.

Climate change is affecting water resources and agricultural output in the Chin region, as can be seen in their water supply and the commencement and duration of various seasons. It is clear these variations are affecting their lives and livelihoods. The findings show that farmers' perceptions align with the rising annual and summer temperatures. However, their perceptions contradict the observed trends in the winter temperatures, as well as yearly, monsoon, and winter precipitation. Furthermore, farmers are increasingly experiencing extreme weather occurrences such as rainfall, floods, landslides, and droughts. These hazards have a negative influence on income and worsen the economic situation for subsistence farmers. Integrating farmers' opinions with hydrometeorological observations improves climate change impact assessment and informs mitigation and adaptation efforts.

9. Conclusion and Discussion

This study explored farmers' perceptions and responses to climate change in Hakha township of Chin State. The result found that the farmers in the local areas have observed climate change and its impact on them. There has been little research done in Chin due to the hardship of transportation. This research focuses on the social, economic, and ecological elements of communities affected by changing agriculture. Traditional shifting agriculture confronts sustainability challenges due to diminishing land holdings and shorter fallow seasons, which has posed a significant danger to the practice's ecological balance. According to the responders, it is apparent that the coup has created new obstacles to climate change. The many outside organizations that previously helped the farmers have abandoned their programs. As a result, it has been difficult for them to achieve climate adaptation. Farmers face increased food insecurity since they cannot access their crops easily. Farmers in the study areas responded that it has become hotter than before because there is no organization or government taking steps to protect the environment. 98% of farmers in the surveyed regions believe that climate change, particularly temperature increases, has caused the village to lose snow in comparison to previous years. One of the issues for Chin farmers since they mostly grow in mountainous

terrain has been water shortages, causing streams to dry up and forcing farmers to rely on irrigation for their crops. This has resulted in food insecurity and poverty. Furthermore, landslides have been regularly occurring and destroying their crops before they can be harvested, and the cultivated field has decreased due to natural disasters. Farmers have reported a rise in temperature, pests/diseases, flood/landslides, and drought, as well as a drop in rainfall and production compared to previous years of farming.

The majority of farmers have observed a decrease in the number of wet days, an increase in the number of hot days, an increase in summer heat, and a decrease in the number of cold days. This might be attributed to the reliance on rice as a primary crop, which requires seasonal rain for growing. Farmers anticipate conflicts over land and water resources, as well as issues with food security, as a result of these changes. Farmers have limited resources and capabilities; thus, they have only implemented feasible adaptation strategies. The adaptation options, which were selected for coping with climate pressure on their farming, included soil conservation, crop diversification, and irrigation techniques. Some of the farmers adapted by changing their crops, for example, planting more vegetables than maize to make more cash crops. The farmers' adaptation differs from each village and their adaptation depends on the temperature and geographical location of the villages.

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Challenges Encountered by LGBTQ+ Individuals in the Workplace: An Analysis in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper investigates the numerous challenges encountered by LGBTQ+ individuals in Myanmar's workplace, with particular emphasis on the violation of their rights to work with freedom and equality in accordance with international human rights treaties. It explores the key concepts and factors that contribute to the challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community. The research employs qualitative methods, including in-depth online interviews with 10 participants, a Google Form with four participants, and a comprehensive review of relevant literature. The findings of this study show that the LGBTQ+ community in Myanmar encountered significant workplace challenges, which not only cause difficulties in their daily work lives but also sometimes impact their employment opportunities. They frequently face violations of their rights to work, including the freedom to choose employment, the principle of equal pay for equal work, entitlement to an appropriate working environment, safeguards against unemployment, and freedom of expression, as guaranteed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Despite the fact that the Myanmar government has ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the absence of legal protections that safeguard the LGBTQ+ community in Myanmar from workplace discrimination and diminished employment opportunities contributes to these challenges. Similarly, deeply rooted traditional customs and religious beliefs in Myanmar as well as a significant lack of understanding of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE) have fostered a challenging workplace for them. This research aims to highlight the factors that hinder their equal opportunities and support the creation of a more inclusive workplace for Myanmar's LGBTQ+ individuals.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE), sexual and gender diversity, right to work

[12] Pyin-Nya-Man-Daing Programme

1. Introduction

The term "LGBTQ+" refers to those who identify as lesbian,[13] gay,[14] bisexual,[15] transgender,[16] queer[17] or questioning,[18] and the plus symbol represents those who have a diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE). While several countries have come to recognize that the umbrella term "LGBTQ+" encompasses the concept of gender, there are still many misconceptions[19] concerned with "sexual and gender diversity" in Myanmar. Compared to the past, attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people have changed slightly in Myanmar. However, conservative beliefs and discriminatory practices against the LGBTQ+ community persist. These persistent issues significantly impact not only their daily activities but also extend to the work environment, including impacting job opportunities and creating challenges in the workplace. These challenges include facing negative criticism and stigmatization based on their sexual and gender diversity as well as unfair treatment and sexual harassment in the workplace. This not only harms their mental health but also hinders their professional career opportunities and development.

All members of the LGBTQ+ community in Myanmar are part of Myanmar society, and therefore deserve the same rights as everyone else, according to Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR, 1948). This Article ensures that all individuals are entitled to all the rights and freedoms stated in the Declaration without any discrimination based on factors such as race, color, sex, birth, or other status.[20] The Universal Declaration of

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[13] Lesbian refers to a homosexual woman who has romantic, emotional, and/or physical attraction exclusively towards other women (International Labour Organization, 2022).

[14] Gay refers to a homosexual man who experience romantic, emotional, and/or physical attraction to other males, similar to women who have an attraction to other women (International Labour Organization, 2022).

[15] Bisexual is a person who feels romantic, emotional, and/or physical attraction exclusively towards people of more than one gender (International Labour Organization, 2022).

[16] The term "transgender" refers to individuals whose gender identity differs from the sex to which they were assigned at birth. "Trans" or "transgender" are umbrella terms encompassing diverse gender identities beyond binary definitions (International Labour Organization, 2022).

[17] The term "queer," previously regarded negatively, has been redefined in a positive manner by some people, seeing it as now including a wide range of sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions (SOGIE). Many who use "queer" feel it represents their nonconformity to sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression norms (International Labour Organization, 2022). The definition of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer is abstracted from a report published by the International Labour Office for the purpose of strengthening and clarification.

[18] Questioning is a person who may be uncertain, reevaluating, or deciding to delay the identification of their sexual identity or gender expression or gender identity. Due to not having of the definition of "Questioning" in International Labour Organization (2022), it was excluded from the document of National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center (2022).

[19] Myanmar is deeply influenced by traditional and toxic masculinity as well as patriarchal customs (ILGA Asian & CAN Myanmar, 2021).

[20] Michelle Bachelet, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, reaffirmed and demonstrated that the term "other status" includes the LGBT**Q**+ community (United Nations, 2018).

Human Rights is a global framework for equal rights and freedom, representing the world community's commitment to protecting the worth and dignity of every person. Thus, they must enjoy full protection under the UDHR, which guarantees all rights regarding employment and workplace conditions regardless of sexual and gender diversity. In addition, the Myanmar government is responsible for ensuring the implementation and protection of their full entitlement to employment rights, like others, as described in the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), which Myanmar has ratified.

Some research has been conducted in Myanmar on the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace and elsewhere. However, there is still a lack of comprehensive studies that analyze these issues in depth from a human rights perspective, particularly with a focus on international human rights instruments. The purpose of this study is to investigate the workplace challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Myanmar compared to others in various fields of employment, with a focus on the application and violation of human rights. Furthermore, the study aims to identify the primary reasons behind these workplace challenges and the exclusion of this community from the workplace. The research is driven by the following questions:

- What human rights violations and challenges have LGBTQ+ individuals in Myanmar encountered in the workplace?
- Why are LGBTQ+ individuals in Myanmar subjected to these kinds of human rights violations and workplace challenges?

2. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research method based on documentary sources and two forms of primary methods: in-depth online interviews via Zoom and an online survey implemented in Google Forms. Literature reviewed consisted of international human rights instruments and related laws, research papers, reports and articles, including those with a focus on Myanmar. Initially, data were collected from nine LGBTQ+ participants who have encountered challenges in the workplace via semi-structured interviews conducted online: two lesbians, one gay man, one trans-woman, three trans-men, one bisexual, and one queer. In the meantime, a survey was developed using Google Forms to facilitate participation for individuals who found it inconvenient to engage in in-depth online interviews. The researcher received responses from five bisexual participants and followed up with some of them to confirm and clarify the information provided. During this follow-up, the researcher became aware of uncertainties in one participant's sexual orientation and her additional challenges remained. Hence, this participant was kindly invited to engage in the online interview. Once consent was obtained from the participant, a Zoom meeting was arranged for an additional in-depth online interview.

In summary, a total of fourteen participants were involved in this research: ten participants were interviewed using an in-depth online interview, and the remaining four were reached through the online survey. Participants for both interviews and the survey were recruited using a snowball sampling method from the researcher's trusted network. To ensure participant

confidentiality, their names were anonymized and described using a coding system. The prefixes IDOI (In-depth Online Interview) and GF (Google Form) are used in this paper. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher, who ensured that the personal information provided could not be disclosed under any circumstances.

This paper consists of four sections. The initial section discusses the meaning and nature of SOGIE (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression). The second section examines the workplace obstacles encountered by participants, evaluating them from a human rights perspective. In the third section, the main factors contributing to these challenges from various perspectives are investigated. Finally, the concluding section provides suggestions and recommendations based on the research findings.

3. The General Concept of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Expression (SOGIE)

All human beings possess a Gender Expression in addition to their Sexual Orientation (SO) and Gender Identity (GI) (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2020). Sexual orientation refers to an individual's capacity for emotional attraction, affection, and sexual relations, which is natural and irreversible, and no one can choose to be born with a particular sexual orientation (Asmawi & Yasin, 2017). The most prevalent characteristics of sexual orientation are homosexuality, which refers to attraction to the same gender; heterosexuality, which refers to attraction to the opposite gender; and bisexuality, which refers to attraction to more than one gender (Eldridge, 2023). Compared to gender identity and gender expression, sexual orientation refers to the people one finds attractive and is drawn to on a romantic, emotional, and sexual level.

Gender identity is a person's subjective perception of their own gender, which may or may not coincide with the sex they were assigned at birth. It involves individuals' attitudes towards their bodies that may be chosen to modify its appearance or bodily functions through medical, surgical, or other procedures. An individual's gender identity is different from their sexual orientation (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2024).

Gender expression refers to the external appearance of an individual, which may or may not coincide with societal norms regarding masculinity or femininity. Gender expression is the manner in which an individual presents their gender through physical appearance, which includes names, pronouns, behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, mannerisms, and bodily characteristics. Gender expression differs from sexual orientation and does not have to precisely reflect gender identity (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2021). According to a study by Colors Rainbow (2019), two tomboys enjoyed dressing in masculine clothes (i.e., have a male gender expression), but have no interest in women (i.e., sexual orientation). Therefore, it is crucial to be aware that an individual's SOGIE status cannot be accurately identified merely by superficially assessing their gender expression.

The concept of Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression is imperative for understanding the wide range of identities and sexual orientations, and provides a basis of comprehension upon which to establish the fundamental values of human civilization (Inoue,

2022). Not acknowledging or discussing concerns related to SOGIE disproportionately affects LGBTQ+ communities (Meyer & Elias, 2022). It is crucial for employers to understand SOGIE because it helps to comprehend part of an employee's or customer's identity, which influences their requirements and experiences (Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB) & Colors Rainbow, 2020). Moreover, the understanding of the concept of SOGIE may help foster a society that values, respects, and treats all individuals with equality and non-discrimination according to human rights. Hence, not only should all individuals get to know the acronym "LGBTQ+" but also the concept of "SOGIE." It is evident that awareness of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression (SOGIE) is required for promoting and establishing a community of acceptance, inclusivity, and well-being.

4. Workplace Challenges Encountered by LGBTQ+ People

Sexual and gender diversity are not relevant to LGBTQ+ individuals' capacity to work. They possess the same abilities as anyone else to do a job. Having the necessity to sustain their livelihoods, they have the right to participate in the workplace of Myanmar, in accordance with human rights standards. However, a large number of challenges restrict LGBTQ+ people's equal inclusion in the workplace, encompassing workplace discrimination, including unfair treatment and biased hiring processes as well as instances of sexual harassment. Given that respondents were selected on the basis that they had faced employment challenges, with the exception of those who did not disclose their SOGIE and IDOI-7 (personal interview, January 13, 2024), all encountered at least one form of challenge in the workplace. These challenges affect their employment opportunities, hinder their ambitious professional goals, and impede their efforts to earn a livelihood.

4.1. Discriminatory Practices in the Workplace

Discrimination in the workplace is when a person or a group of people, whether intentional or not, are treated unfairly due to certain characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender identity, disability, sexual orientation, etc. Workplace discrimination may occur between coworkers or between employees and employers (Cooks-Campbell, 2021). This may also happen if an employer disciplines, terminates, or takes adverse actions against someone for discussing, disclosing, or inquiring about pay. Discrimination can appear in various forms and target an individual or a group (U.S Department of Labor, 2016). Discriminating against individuals based on their LGBTQ+ identities is a contributing factor to their dehumanization, resulting in torment and unjust treatment of this community (ILGA Asian & CAN Myanmar, 2021). Additionally, such discrimination affects every step of the employment process, from seeking employment, seeking promotions, trying to retain their jobs, to obtaining employment benefits. Hence, stigma and discrimination pose significant challenges for LGBTQ+ individuals, hindering their career opportunities and progress throughout the employment cycle (International Labour Organization, 2016).

In the workplace, some LGBTQ+ individuals choose to disclose their LGBTQ+ status, while others choose to keep it hidden. Those who prefer to keep their sexual orientation and gender identity hidden are not immune from experiencing discrimination (International Labour Organization, 2016). In other words, the reason they conceal their sexual orientation and gender

identity is due to fear of being discriminated against. Nevertheless, hiding their identities is stressful for them because they have to live differently in public and in private (Colgan et al., 2007; Hoel et al., 2014). In this survey, all three participants who were not open about their sexual identities stated they faced constant anxiety about potential discovery by their co-workers despite not experiencing significant discrimination due to their sexual orientation concealment. Colgan et al. (2007) point out that several barriers hinder LGBTQ+ employees from feeling comfortable to disclose their SOGIE at their work. These barriers include concerns about career setbacks, temporary employment status, co-workers' attitudes or behaviors driven by particular ideas about masculinity or driven by religion, and the absence of openly LGBTQ+ senior staff.

On the other hand, those who openly express their LGBTQ+ status frequently encountered harassment and discrimination (International Labour Organization, 2016). In this research, 11 participants openly disclosed their sexual and gender diversity at their work environment. IDOI-6 (personal interview, January 5, 2024), a news presenter, disclosed that as a transgender woman she experienced societal disapproval. Furthermore, when she was hired as a presenter at trade shows and product launch events, she received only some advertised products and taxi fares without obtaining full payment for her work, although her cis male co-presenter was fully paid. Also, during his employment at a hotel, IDOI-5 (personal interview, January 20, 2024), a transgender man, faced severe discriminatory practices from the hotel manager and senior colleagues. The hotel's senior colleagues consistently forced him to perform various tasks to show their power and often left him to handle them alone, even when teamwork was required. Moreover, they even took the tip money that hotel guests had left for him. The way they treated him was deliberately discriminatory and tyrannical. The manager also did not arrange housing materials, such as blankets, mosquito net, bedstead, etc., for this participant in the same manner he did for other employees. When he complained, the manager responded with hostility. He stated that he later became aware that the manager had a history of transphobia and that such discriminatory behavior was intentionally displayed. Nonetheless, the hotel manager was absolutely obligated to provide non-discriminatory material options for all staff, regardless of his personal beliefs regarding gender identity. Discriminatory, harsh, and hostile actions against him are hindering his right to fair and favorable conditions of work, as guaranteed by Article 23(1) of the UDHR. In addition, the manager withheld all his salaries and bonuses. Due to their different gender identities, both IDOI-6 and IDOI-5 encountered wage exploitation and were not fully paid. Denying someone equal pay based on their SOGIE violates Article 23(2) of the UDHR, which guarantees everyone has equal pay for equal work, regardless of any personal characteristic.

A responsible person from the hotel instructed the manager to return money to the employee for damages incurred after being made aware of the manager's maneuvers, but the manager not only disregarded this instruction, he also fired the participant. This participant was fired unjustly from the hotel without receiving either salaries or bonuses for two months he worked. Apart from violating his right to equal pay for equal work, firing him unfairly violated his right to work and caused him unemployment, as recognized in Article 23(1) of the UDHR. The absence of awareness about SOGIE and policies that support LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion in the hotel, particularly a policy against all forms of gender-based discrimination and

exploitation, is a key factor causing these types of aggravated discrimination. In addition, IDOI-3 (personal interview, January 7, 2024) and IDOI-4 (personal interview, January 9, 2024), who identify as transgender men, applied for and worked in positions held by women. Their employers, however, also wanted them to perform tasks typically associated with men's work—types of work that women may be physically unable to do. In contrast, their female colleagues did not have to perform these tasks. Despite being transgender men, they may not have the same physical capacity as cisgender men. The pressure to perform both male and female roles at the workplace causes gender-based inequality and exploitation of labor. These participants' discriminatory experiences prevented them from receiving the right to a fair and non-discriminatory workplace. Therefore, this caused them to lose their right to work under fair conditions, which is protected by Article 23(1) of the UDHR.

IDOI-9 (personal interview, January 21, 2024) and IDOI-10 (personal interview, January 26, 2024), who have worked in the NGO fields, have experienced a few instances of discrimination, such as indirect and unintentional discrimination. IDOI-2 (personal interview, December 7, 2023), who also worked in the NGO field, has not encountered any discrimination. IDOI-10 recounted her experiences of indirect discrimination from a male supervisor regarding her capacity. When reporting job-related inconveniences, she received an indirect response saying, "You claimed that gender identity and capacity are unrelated, so why don't you handle this issue yourself?" (IDOI-10). Colors Rainbow (2019) also highlights that even in international organizations and NGOs where equal treatment is expected, managers and human resources officials may doubt the performance abilities of LGBTQ+ individuals. However, according to the findings of this research, they encounter fewer severe discriminatory practices compared to those in other fields.

4.2. Challenges in Hiring: Clothing and Gender Expression Discrimination

In addition to the above discrimination, it was found that certain LGBTQ+ individuals faced barriers even before entering the workplace. They were subjected to discrimination at the hiring process, which resulted in rejection from employment opportunities. Interviewees pointed out that the hiring process encompasses not only discriminatory job postings but also discrimination in the application process, such as in the screening and interview processes. Job postings are typically referred to using gender-specific terms: male and female in Myanmar (Colors Rainbow, 2018). Both study interviewees and Colors Rainbow (2018) articulate that certain LGBTQ+ individuals perceive a lack of inclusivity in these job postings. Eaton (2022) suggested that job titles and descriptions in the hiring process should be gender-neutral, such as server instead of waitress, salesperson instead of salesman, and other gender-neutral terms where gender does not impact the success of the role. Furthermore, interviews for the current study revealed that some LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly transgender people, faced difficulties in describing their gender on job applications due to the limited options of female and male.

The study also shows that transgender participants encountered more discriminatory practices and challenges in the hiring process compared to members of the LGBQ+ community, who typically present physically in alignment with the sex assigned at birth. IDOI-6 encountered

indirect denial from human resources persons, who expressed concerns that hiring a trans-woman as a news presenter would be risky for them, despite her passionate applications to almost every news organization for about three years. Around 2018, an LGBT-related online news media employed her for the presenter role. However, as a trans-woman, she did not always have the same opportunities to participate as others, and at times, was merely used for tokenism.

Similarly, IDOI-5 reported diligently applying for jobs almost every year but faced repeated rejections, at least ten times annually, due to his masculine appearance and LGBT status. Consequently, he had to rely on his family for his livelihood and felt disheartened to seek further jobs. Furthermore, these frequent rejections also caused him to worry about the stability of the jobs he did obtain. Additionally, while IDOI-3 and IDOI-4 applied for sales and marketing positions, they were denied more than three times in the interview processes. The reason for denial was that the company thought their clothing and appearance were inappropriate for their job positions and standards. Some employees and hiring managers see transgender men as belonging to their assigned sex at birth rather than recognizing their masculine presentation. As a result, transgender men are forced to wear stereotypically feminine clothing to be considered suitable for their enterprises. This impedes their ability to exercise their freedom of expression as a fundamental right guaranteed by Article 19 of the UDHR. According to this Article, transgender individuals have the full right to express their identities freely through gender expression, including their personal clothing choices. This contributes to a more respectful workplace in which all individuals feel valued for their own distinct identities.

Despite the requirement for specific clothing in certain workplaces, IDOI-4 stated that positions such as marketing and sales should allow unisex clothing. IDOI-3 mentioned that conforming to dress codes or wearing clothing that conflicted with their gender identity caused them discomfort. Transgender people in Colors Rainbow (2018) also showed that when seeking jobs, they prioritized those with flexible dress codes that align with their gender identity, occasionally declining those where they cannot negotiate uniform requirements with employers. This demonstrates that challenges related to clothing are a greater issue for transgender people than for cisgender people when seeking employment and obtaining job opportunities,

4.3. Sexual Harassment against LGBTQ+ Employees

Sexual harassment is defined as any unwanted verbal, non-verbal, or physical behavior of a sexual nature that violates a person's dignity and creates an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment (European Parliament and of the Council, 2006). Verbal sexual harassment may include making comments or innuendo about someone's body, clothing, or appearance, as well as asking personal questions about their sexual preferences or sex life. Non-verbal harassment includes observing someone's entire appearance from head to toe, like 'elevator eyes', following them, and using sexually suggestive gestures or facial expressions. Physical harassment is any unwanted touching of someone's clothing, hair, or body without

their consent. This includes actions like massages, hugs, kisses, or rubbing against someone in a sexual manner (Council of Europe, 2024).

All respondents who disclosed their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression received derogatory labels, such as tranny or shemale, etc., except-one, IDOI-7. IDOI-1 (personal interview, December 24, 2023) faced criticism for his 'unmanly' walking style and was abused as a 'sissy.' Additionally, while IDOI-2 worked as a volunteer teacher, he received some criticism, including comments that his voice lacked a masculine tone in his teaching. Even though he was confident in his teaching abilities, the negative criticism occasionally made him feel less confident in his performance as a teacher. Moreover, GF-1 (personal interview, January 23, 2024), who worked as a lawyer, experienced unpleasant behavior and criticism on same-sex relationships from her co-lawyers. Moreover, she was accused of unfounded criticism that having the same-sex relationship is not complying with laws and disrespecting the court, a view held by misconception.

In addition, IDOI-6 revealed that people often viewed her exclusively in terms of sexual matters and frequently communicated with her in ways that tested her responses to sexual topics, whether in jest or in a serious manner, which negatively impacted her reputation. Additionally, she recalled an incident of physical harassment when they did not permit her to put a microphone on by herself; instead, they attempted to do so with force and at times intentionally touched areas below her neck. IDOI-5 mentioned that during his employment at a fried chicken shop, a group of staff members purposefully hit his breasts with their elbows, resulting in a situation of deliberate group bullying. Similarly, while IDOI-1 was employed at two private banks, he experienced inappropriate physical contact from coworkers who frequently touched his buttocks and chest, and received an inappropriate comment with sexual undertones from a senior colleague: "My wife is not at home right now, so come to my house with me." He mentioned that the reason for leaving his job was largely related to experiencing physical and severe verbal sexual harassment. These forms of sexual harassment not only violate individual rights but also create barriers to ensuring favorable work conditions and safety in the workplace, which are fundamental principles protected under Article 23(1) of the UDHR.

According to interviews, IDOI-1 was the only individual who received a satisfactory resolution for the sexual harassment he experienced from his supervisor at one bank. Others did not receive an adequate resolution from their respective-superiors, and occasionally some participants had no opportunity to report such harassment. Senior staff often dismissed or ignored such cases when reported. IDOI-6 received a response indicating that issues of sexual harassment were not uncommon for a transgender woman and even failed to acknowledge wrongdoing. It is apparent that Myanmar society regards sexual harassment against LGBTQ+ individuals as an ordinary and acceptable affair. IDOI-2 also reported that such actions against LGBTQ+ or transgender women are often viewed as the victim's fault, whereas sexual harassment against cisgender women is typically condemned by society. In addition, while Section 509 of the Penal Code (1861) in Myanmar provides protection against sexual harassment solely for cisgender women, it does not extend these protections to include other genders or the LGBTQ+ community. The government should ensure legal protection and

support for all individuals, regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, and Myanmar society should acknowledge that sexual harassment against all genders is unacceptable.

5. Drivers of Workplace Discrimination against LGBTQ+ people

Religious doctrines in Myanmar, including Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam, often express that homosexuality is a "sin" and condemn all sexual orientations deviating from heterosexuality (C.A.N Myanmar, 2020). In particular, Buddhism is the predominant religion in Myanmar, where there is a widespread belief that individuals who committed adultery or were promiscuous in their past lives were reborn as people with diverse sexual and gender identities in their current lives. Moreover, traditional beliefs in Myanmar uphold a dominant societal norm that commonly accepts the male gender as more noble. The literature (ILGA Asian & CAN Myanmar, 2021; Colors Rainbow, 2019) identifies that deeply rooted religion and patriarchal customs in Myanmar subject LGBTQ+ people to restrictions and social stigma, heightening the risk of abuse and unfair treatment. Additionally, in Myanmar, there is a lack of knowledge and a well-defined vocabulary about SOGIE, causing miscommunication in various settings such as the home, school, and workplace, as stated by the Myanmar Centre for Responsible Business (MCRB) and Colors Rainbow (2020). This study indicates that cases of discrimination are generally less common in environments where SOGIE is recognized and comprehended, compared to environments where SOGIE awareness is absent. Also, IDOI-9, who serves as a trainer for areas concerning SOGIE and LGBTQ+ issues, recounted her finding that individuals who gain SOGIE awareness recognize that such behavior constitutes discrimination and understand that these actions are unacceptable and should be avoided. At the very least, they are aware of the need to refrain from blatant and serious discrimination, even if some people have not yet fully embraced acceptance (IDOI-9).

In addition, challenges for human rights violations against LGBTQ+ individuals are connected to the absence of adequate legal protections. Although Myanmar does not directly discriminate against LGBTQ+ individuals within its labor laws or workplace policies, their status and existence is prohibited by laws such as Section 377 of the Penal Code, which criminalizes same-sex relations and indirectly fosters a discriminatory environment. Additionally, the definitions of "sex" in Sections 348 and 352 of the Constitution of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (2008), under Chapter VIII on Citizenship Rights, which explicitly mention only men and women in the context of protection against discrimination. The absence of the LGBTQ+ community in these definitions appears to exclude them from such protections. Moreover, Section 350 specifically addresses only women with regard to having equal rights and salaries as men, without mention of other genders. The lack of explicit mention or protection for the LGBTQ+ community in these constitutional provisions further contributes to the exclusion and marginalization in Myanmar's labor laws. Consequently, while some labor laws, such as the Factories Act (1951), the Workmen's Compensation Act (1923), and the Leave and Holiday Act (1951), include specific protective provisions for women and children as vulnerable groups, the LGBTQ+ community has not been included in these protections, even with subsequent amendments. Myanmar ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) on October 6, 2017 (Right to Education, 2018) and has

been a member of the International Labour Organization (ILO)[21] since 1948 (International Labour Organization, 2020). Due to this, irrespective of a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression, the Myanmar government has an absolute obligation to uphold all rights for every Myanmar person as outlined in the ICESCR and enshrined in the ILO conventions. Despite the severity of discrimination and challenges encountered by the LGBTQ+ community, a succession of Myanmar governments has failed to take sufficient steps to effectively protect the community from such discrimination. Additionally, they have not enacted laws, regulations, or policies[22] that specifically target and address the right to work for LGBTQ+ individuals. The experiences of several countries indicate that implementing policies and enacting laws that support equal rights and prohibit discrimination can effectively reduce the stigma associated with sexual and gender diversity (Evans, 2018). Thus, this study shows that LGBTQ+ persons are often denied the right to earn a living through work, do not receive fair wages or equal pay for work of equal value, lack the opportunity to freely choose their employment, and face unsafe working conditions, contrary to the protections provided in Article 6(1) and Article 7(a)(i)(ii)(b) of the ICESCR. This is linked to the government's inaction in implementing and enforcing these rights. Briefly stated, this study has demonstrated that the reasons contributing to the barriers faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in achieving equal opportunities in Myanmar's workplace include deeply rooted patriarchal beliefs, a lack of SOGIE awareness in Myanmar society, and the absence of workplace-specific anti-discrimination laws that protect the LGBTQ+ community.

6. Conclusions

There are diverse perspectives on the issue of ensuring equal rights for LGBTQ+ individuals, which remains a contentious topic in Myanmar. This research has revealed substantial human rights violations and challenges, including several types of discriminating behaviors and sexual harassment, both physical and verbal, implicit and explicit, faced by those who identify as LGBTQ+, both within and outside the workplace. Study findings demonstrate that the prevailing conservative mindset in Myanmar society frequently regards LGBTQ+ individuals as having lower capacities and being less qualified. Over time, moreover, denying rights to employment based on LGBTQ+ status may not only diminish Myanmar's human resources but also jeopardize the future of LGBTQ+ individuals. The majority of interviewees expressed a desire for LGBTQ+ individuals to be recognized as human beings and to be treated equally, in accordance with workplace policies and human rights standards. They are not demanding more rights than others. It is essential to effectively address these challenges and ensure equal human

[21] Even if they have not ratified the ILO's Conventions, the members of the ILO have an obligation to respect the fundamental principles and rights at work. These include the prohibition of forced labor and child labor, the freedom of association, the right to organize and bargain collectively, equal pay for work of equal value, the elimination of employment discrimination, and the provision of a safe and healthy working environment (International Labour Organization, 1998).

[22] The youth policy drafted by the National League for Democracy (NLD) in 2018 enhanced its recognition of the involvement of LGBTQ+ individuals; however, significant actionable measures concerning workplace inclusion for this community at the implementation level were not found.

rights standards are applied. The first requirement is the elimination of deeply rooted conservative beliefs that drive prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community. Beyond this, collaboration of government, international organizations, and civil society organizations is crucial to provide widespread education to Myanmar society regarding awareness of SOGIE and LGBTQ+ issues.

In addition, the Myanmar government is largely responsible for protecting the LGBTQ+ community from workplace discrimination and ensuring their right to work and employment, in accordance with Myanmar's ratification of the ICESCR and its membership in the International Labor Organization. Only if the Myanmar government actually implements and enforces these rights, can the LGBTQ+ community receive equal protection and the right to work, as other people do. Therefore, the government should prioritize modifying and replacing specific gender terms in discriminatory legal provisions with gender-neutral languages, such as 'any gender,' to demonstrate and enhance inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community within the legal framework, even if immediate enactment of anti-discrimination laws is not possible.

Myanmar society must not rely solely on government efforts to address these issues, but society must also modify its conservative notions toward this community to achieve an effective resolution. It is crucial that Myanmar society not only corrects its perceptions but also genuinely accepts the existence of the LGBTQ+ community without scorn. Consequently, this paper provides some recommendations and suggestions for both the government and broader Myanmar society to support swiftly eliminating workplace discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. These recommendations aim to promote the recognition and respect of their right to work, to obtain their freedom to choose employment and equal pay for equal work, to expand the employment environment for LGBTQ+ individuals, and to grant them equal opportunities in the workplace if they are qualified, without viewing misconceptions.

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Annex 1: Data collected

No	**Name**	**Sexual Orientation**	**Gender Identity**	**Gender Expression**	**Disclosure of LGBTQ+ Identity**
1.	IDOI-1	Queer	Male	Masculine	Yes
2.	IDOI-2	Gay	Male	Androgynous	Yes
3.	IDOI-3	Straight	Trans man	Masculine	Yes
4.	IDOI-4	Straight	Trans man	Masculine	Yes
5.	IDOI-5	Straight	Trans man	Masculine	Yes
6.	IDOI-6	Straight	Trans woman	Feminine	Yes
7	IDOI-7	Lesbian	Female	Feminine	Yes
8.	IDOI-8	Lesbian	Female	Androgynous	Yes
9.	IDOI-9	Bisexual	Female	Feminine	Yes
10.	IDOI-10	Questioning	Genderfluid	Gender-Nonconforming	Yes

Table 1: Data collected through online interviews

No	Name	Sexual Orientation	Disclosure of LGBTQ+ Identity
1.	GF-1	Bisexual	Yes
2.	GF-2	Bisexual	No
3.	GF-3	Bisexual	No
4.	GF-4	Bisexual	No

Table 2: Data collected through online survey

Challenges in Access to Quality Secondary Education in Myanmar after the 2021 Military Coup

Khin Yadana Kyaw[23]

Shwin Thant Lei[24]

Abstract

Improving education quality and accessibility is essential for reducing poverty, developing human capital, and fostering a peaceful and prosperous future. Armed conflicts inflict severe disruptions on children's access to education, leading to the destruction of school infrastructure, displacement of students and teachers, and the closure of educational institutions. In 2021, the military coup in Myanmar resulted in many negative consequences and one of the sectors deeply affected by the aftermath was the education sector, which had devastating effects on access to a quality continuous education system, particularly secondary education in Myanmar. The coup worsened the existing challenges and created new barriers to access quality secondary education for approximately 200,000 children in Myanmar (Burmese, 2022).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate challenges faced by students, teachers, and secondary educational institutions related to access to quality secondary education in Myanmar. Moreover, this study examines the impact of technology integration in secondary education, investigating how digital tools and online resources affect teaching and learning outcomes.

Qualitative data collection methods used for this study include interviews, surveys, and focus group discussions from four schools in conflict areas like Bago, Sagaing, Mon, and Magway. These methods allow us to get a deeper understanding of the challenges students face in accessing continuous and quality secondary education in conflict areas

The findings reveal the primary challenges of access to quality education faced by students in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup and the impact of technology integration, using digital tools and online resources, on teaching and learning outcomes in secondary education. By exploring the primary challenges faced by secondary students in conflict areas and accessing the role of technology, this research aims to highlight the education crisis in Myanmar and provide insights into potential solutions to address this issue.

Keywords: Secondary Education, Education in Emergencies, Military Coup, Conflict Challenges, Online Education, Learning Outcomes, Teaching Outcomes

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[23] Post-Secondary Education Forum (PSEF)

[24] Post-Secondary Education Forum (PSEF)

Introduction

According to Poirier (2011), the immediate victims of war are often children, with millions in the region succumbing to injuries or losing their lives due to armed conflicts. Furthermore, armed conflicts inflict severe disruptions on children's access to education, leading to the destruction of school infrastructure, displacement of students and teachers, and the closure of educational institutions (Davies, 2003). The military coup that took place in Myanmar on February 1, 2021 has had negative consequences and one of the sectors deeply affected by the aftermath was the education sector. The coup exacerbated ongoing challenges and introduced new obstacles, affecting around 200,000 children's ability to access quality education in Myanmar (Burmese, 2022).

When the military attacked with armed forces, schools became targets of attacks, resulting in tragic incidents that left children and teachers injured or killed. The disruptions caused by the military coup in Myanmar, displacement, and the targeting of schools and educational personnel have severely impacted the educational landscape, particularly post-secondary education in Myanmar. This research aims to identify and analyze challenges faced by students, teachers, and educational institutions in the realm of secondary education, including issues regarding access to quality post-secondary education. Additionally, this research aims to examine the impact of technology integration in post-secondary education and investigate how digital tools and online resources affect teaching and learning outcomes.

Furthermore, this research explores the primary challenges students face in accessing quality education in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup. It also explores the impact of technology integration, using digital tools and online resources, on teaching and learning outcomes in post-secondary education. By exploring the primary challenges faced by post-secondary students in conflict areas and accessing the role of technology, this research aims to highlight the education crisis in Myanmar and provide insights into potential solutions to address this issue.

Methods

This research used qualitative methods to measure various variables, including survey questionnaires, interview responses, and focus group discussions regarding the challenges of access to quality secondary education in Myanmar. The purpose of this approach is to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges in accessing quality secondary education in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup.

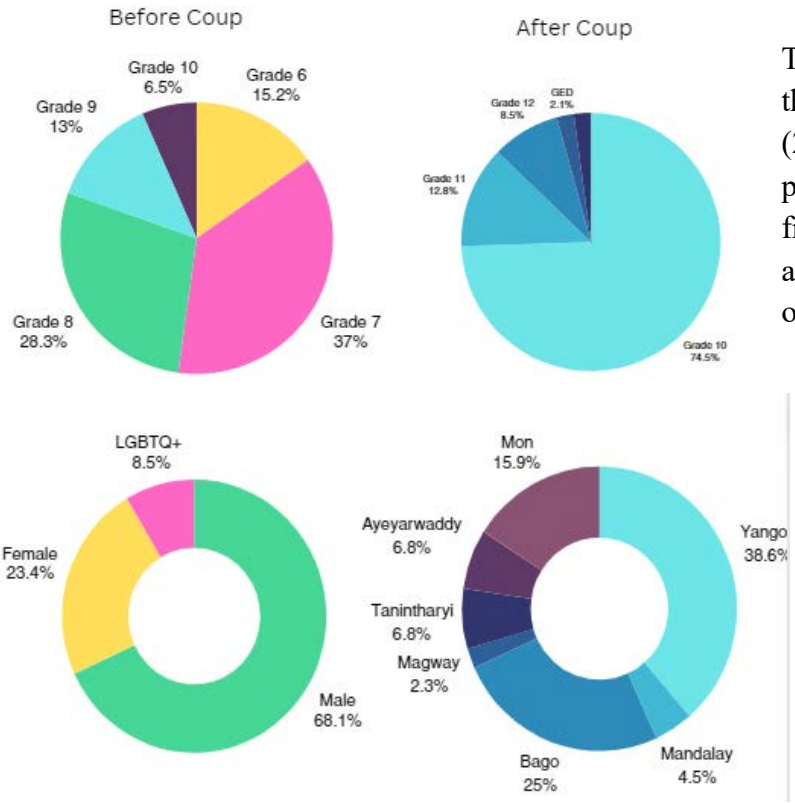
For the surveys, this research used an open-ended questionnaire to define the challenges secondary students face. A total of 47 students participated and completed the Google form survey anonymously. For the interviews, this research used six primary questions and other follow-up questions. These interview questions allowed the participants to express their experiences, perspectives, and feelings. A total of three teachers participated in an interview. For the focus group discussion, this research used six questions and other follow-up questions. A total of five teachers, school officers, and administrators participated in the focus group discussion. Therefore, this research's target population is students and teachers from conflict zones, especially in Sagaing Region, Bago Region and Mon State.

The first step in collecting data began with creating interview questions that were refined and finalized after discussions with research trainers, peers and colleges. We sent invitations via email to selected institutions and followed up with phone calls to schedule the interviews. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed for precision. These transcripts were color-coded by different categories, which guaranteed both accuracy and reliability of the data. The themes and interview questions were organized in a word file based on main areas such as the internet, contentious electricity problems, security related issues and financial difficulties from the sides of school, teachers and parents, and support from schools and parents for the students in conflict areas. Finally, all the data from the surveys, individual interviews and focus group discussion were grouped under key themes and organized by a color-coding system. Only the key points and quotes were highlighted and a part of the same was taken into account while coding. This approach guaranteed that all of the parts were in sync with the research objectives and could explicitly enhance the study's validity and reliability.

Key findings from this study help to explain the primary challenges of access to quality secondary education and reveal an urgent need for policies to address this issue. Data from surveys were analyzed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis to define the challenges faced by students in the conflict zones. Qualitative data synthesized from existing literature and interviews were also used to contextualize and help interpret the findings from the student surveys.

Results

Demographic Data



Total respondents are 47. Among them, 32 (68.1%) are male, 11 (23.4%) are female and 4 (8.5%) prefer not to say. They all come from different regions and they are secondary students from online community schools.

The data shows that before the coup, the majority of the students were in Grade 8, followed by Grade 7 with 17 students. There were also smaller numbers of students in Grades 6, 9, 10, and only one student in Grade 5. After the coup, the distribution of students' educational status changed. The majority of students were in Grade 10, followed by Grade 11 and Grade 12. Moreover, one student was pursuing the General Educational Development (GED) program and one student had dropped out without specifying current educational status. The coup led to changes in the curriculum and school schedules, which could have affected students' academic progress. Additionally, the coup caused some students to drop out of school due to safety concerns, which could have contributed to the increase in the number of students in Grade 10 and the decrease in the number of students in lower grades. The data shows that the coup had an impact on the educational journey of the students. However, it is important to note that this data shows a limited sample size and does not reflect on the entire population's educational status in Myanmar after the coup. In the next section, the research delves into the primary challenges faced by secondary education students in conflict areas, specifically in Myanmar. The identified challenges include internet connection, electricity, security concerns, financial problems, lack of student support, and other minor challenges.

The Impact of Internet Connectivity on Secondary Education

In Myanmar, the influence of internet reliability on higher education is noticeable. According to Athan, a freedom of expression organization, the military junta in Myanmar disconnected internet and telephone services in approximately 80 townships across the nation (Irrawaddy, 2024). Students and educators faced difficulties in adapting to online learning platforms due to the ongoing national crisis. The closure of schools because of the pandemic and political instability emphasizes the crucial need for dependable internet access for effective online education (Teacircle MM, 2023). The finding shows that the impact of poor internet connectivity on post-secondary education is profound and pervasive, significantly impeding students' ability to engage effectively in online learning environments. As one participant expressed, *"The Internet is challenging for me because it has a high potential to miss class when there is a terrible internet connection."*

The challenges stemming from unstable internet access extend beyond missed classes to disrupted exams and hindering participation in group discussions and projects. Another participant lamented, *"I am often out of the zoom due to poor internet connection, making it difficult to participate fully in the class activities."*

These interruptions not only disrupt the flow of learning but also contribute to feelings of frustration and isolation among students. Furthermore, the lack of reliable internet access disproportionately affects students from marginalized communities, widening existing socioeconomic disparities in educational outcomes. Participants recounted having to resort to extreme measures such as climbing mountains or relocating to urban areas just to access reliable internet connection, underscoring the lengths students must go to pursue their education. These first-hand experiences underscore the urgency of addressing the digital divide in education as access to reliable internet becomes increasingly essential for academic success.

The disruptions not only hinder the continuity of learning but also exacerbate socio-economic disparities, disproportionately affecting students from conflict areas.

In addition, the challenges posed by internet connectivity from the perspective of teachers are significant and multifaceted, as well. As one educator highlighted, *"If I have a bad internet connection, they cannot hear my voice and when they get a bad connection, I cannot hear their voice."*

This underscores the crucial role of stable internet access in facilitating effective communication and instruction between teachers and students in online learning environments. Furthermore, the geographical disparities in internet accessibility exacerbate these challenges, with varying rates of connectivity depending on the location of students. Teachers are compelled to adapt to these circumstances, often needing to take leave when faced with poor internet connectivity and subsequently having to compensate by re-teaching missed material multiple times to students who also face connectivity issues.

Moreover, according to Haffner (2022), following the coup, there was a significant surge in the cost of internet access, resulting in a doubling of mobile data prices within a mere two-month period. This increase posed challenges for individuals in staying connected and impacted their daily work routines. As reflected in one teacher's account,

> *In the years 2018-2019, electricity rarely went off. We don't need to worry to charge our devices. At that time, about 5 Gbs could be bought with one thousand kyat. But after the coup, we can get about 488mb with one thousand kyat.*

This drastic reduction in affordable data packages exacerbated the financial burden on teachers who spent significantly more to sustain online teaching sessions. The combination of rising internet bills and electricity costs emerged as a major challenge for educators navigating the transition to online instruction. Thus, the internet connectivity issues faced by teachers and students not only impede effective communication and instruction but also pose significant financial challenges for both educators and students.

The Impact of Electricity on Secondary Education

Another pressing challenge is the unreliable electricity supply. Frequent power outages in conflict areas hinder students' educational pursuits. Without electricity, they cannot use electronic devices for learning purposes, which disrupts students' study time. A teacher from Bago stated,

> *If the electricity is cut off, both teachers and students have to cancel the classes. We cannot do anything when our devices are out of battery. If the students cancel the class, teachers can replace classes. But students are aggrieved when the teachers cancel the class. So, for me, I prepared a power bank for Wi-Fi and a power bank for my laptop.*

Access to electricity is essential for online classes and communication platforms. A lack of electricity hinders students' access to online educational materials and information necessary for their studies. When the electricity goes off, sometimes up to 10 hours a day, the students cannot use Wi-Fi even though they have a power bank. These power outages lead to significant

disruptions to their learning routines and overall academic progress. One of the school officers from the focus group discussion also said, *"We had to postpone two or three times to hold a meeting."* The power outages and unstable internet can lead to delays in essential meetings, impacting decision-making and planning for educational initiatives.

Moreover, a teacher from the online school in Sagaing Region also highlighted,

> *Another main teaching resource challenges that we are facing are being cut off electricity and the internet. In these cases, the teachers cannot help the students. What the teacher can do is to teach back the lessons the students missed and share the lesson recordings.*

The reliance on electricity for both teaching and learning is a significant challenge for online classes. The power outages disrupt education and prevent teachers from conducting regular classes. This leads to missed lessons that must be re-taught or lessons that must be recorded and shared with students. Unfortunately, this is a reflection of the additional effort required from both teachers and students to overcome such disruptions.

The Impact of Security Concerns on Secondary Education

Security concerns are also a substantial barrier to accessing quality secondary education in conflict regions. In conflict regions like Myanmar, the displacement of families due to the ongoing conflicts is a significant threat to accessing quality secondary education for students. The students said if they are homeless, they must earn money first. Even if they want to learn, they will not be able to focus on education. One student said,

> *Due to the conflict, we have to flee. When we lose families, we cannot focus on education. Because of the homeless, we cannot think about education. In addition, there is an ongoing conflict where we live, we have to worry about when the battle will start. So, we think those factors can affect access to quality education.*

Moreover, the threat of violence and uncertainty surrounding the conflict also hinder students' access to quality secondary education. The fear and anxiety that come from living in a conflict zone create an environment of stress, which makes it difficult for students to engage in learning effectively. One teacher said,

> *Some students ask to leave the class as they hear the loud sound of the weapon or bombardment. Some students did not learn when the officers came to their houses for guest registration. For me, I have to hide that I am teaching in the school under NUG due to security issues. All of the staff, teachers, supporters, and students do care about security. I think security will be the biggest issue for us.*

In one of the individual interviews, another teacher also highlighted the importance of hiding his identity due to security concerns, saying, *"Due to security, teachers have to hide their identity that can hinder communication interactively with the students."*

Security concerns force teachers to conceal their identities, which affects the quality of teacher-student engagement. This creates a barrier to building trust, open communication, and a productive learning environment, all of which are essential for secondary education.

The teacher from Sagaing online school also added,

> *The main challenge that teachers encounter are security issues as long as most of the teachers in our schools are CDMer. They have to move from one place to another due to security concerns.*

Specifically, the teachers who were involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) encountered severe security concerns and faced constant threats to their safety, forcing them to relocate frequently. This instability disrupts their teaching and affects the continuity of education for their students. Teachers must prioritize their safety over their professional duties, leading to interruptions in lessons and a lack of stability in students' learning environments. The situation also places an emotional and financial strain on teachers, as they must continually adapt to new locations while receiving little to no income. The issue of security goes beyond the immediate safety of teachers and students. It affects education quality, accessibility, and teacher retention in conflict zones.

Moreover, a school administrator from the focus group discussion mentioned, "*Sometimes, connections with the board members fail due to unstable internet connection, security and displacement."*

Unstable electricity, lack of internet access, and security concerns of students, teachers and school administrators all create barriers to effective communication and learning environments. In the context of online education, especially after the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, security concerns added a big layer of difficulty for educators and administrators. This hampered the ability to plan effectively, share updates, and implement timely responses to challenges in the education system.

Furthermore, the recent military conscription law intensified the students' security concerns. There is a sense of hopelessness and perception that their lives could be cut short. One of the responses from the survey answered, "*Now the military announced the military service law. Thus, we are worried when we enter the military and I think our life will end like that.*

Security concerns due to the loss of homes, the struggle for survival and the fear of violence all contribute to a challenging environment that affect students' access to quality education and hinders their concentration on their studies.

The Impact of Financial Problems on Secondary Education

The economic hardships stemming from the political coup severely impact postsecondary education. Many families struggle financially, making it difficult for students to afford school fees and textbooks. Moreover, most students living in rural areas are faced with education disparities. They are losing their education rights and working alongside Thailand and Malaysia. Socioeconomic factors and limited resources in rural areas underscore the education gap resulting from the coup, highlighting the hardships in these students' lives. On the other hand, many say they have found "true education" and are gaining a meaningful and valuable experience that goes beyond academic knowledge.

Additionally, the financial challenges faced by the schools directly affect the teachers who rely on it for their livelihood. When the school operates independently, some teachers depend on the school fees collected from students to sustain their salaries. One teacher said,

> *From next year, we will collaborate with NUG's MOE[25]. NUG's MOE declares free education. If our school asks for the school fees from the students, our school will deviate from the policy of NUG's MOE. Thus, there is potential to reduce the salaries of teachers as the school relies only on donations from the students' parents. This policy is good for students, but it will be more difficult for teachers' living. If there is not enough financial support, an organization will not run well. Some teachers cannot work beyond the school, as they are CDMers. If the teachers are not able to depend on their salary for their living, they will find other alternative work, giving up their passionate job.*

Moreover, one teacher from Bago also mentioned,

> *I only take my duty in the morning because I have to work in the afternoon for my living. Other teachers are also the same as me. Most of the teachers have to find other jobs beyond the class time.*

Teachers are not financially secure and must find supplementary income outside of their teaching roles. Thus, teachers may not be able to dedicate their full attention or energy to their teaching duties. This can impact the quality of instruction and support that students receive, especially in online or conflict-affected settings. Financial problems are a widespread issue among teachers.

In his individual interview, the teacher from Sagaing online school also highlighted the financial difficulties of CDM teachers, who are his colleagues. He stated,

> *Since they decided to participate in CDM, they do not receive their salary anymore and have to struggle a lot for living. Those teachers cannot work outside jobs due to CDMers status. I can say that financial problems will be the second most challenging problem for teachers.*

By refusing to work under the military regime, these teachers forfeit their government salaries, causing them economic hardship. Additionally, their status as CDM participants prevents them from taking on other jobs, further compounding their financial difficulties. According to the research result, financial problems are the second most significant challenge for these educators, after security concerns. Financial problems are a great barrier for teachers to support themselves and effectively contribute to students' learning.

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[25] Abbreviations
NUG**:** National Unity Government
MOE**:** Ministry of Education

The Crucial Role of Parental Support in Online Education Success

The role of parents' assistance is essential in helping students emotionally, financially, and practically to overcome the challenges of online education and create an atmosphere that nurtures holistic growth. Roy et al. (2023) mentioned that the importance of parental support in the success of online education in Myanmar is underscored by the obstacles encountered by students in accessing quality online learning tools and the discrepancies in parental engagement influenced by economic status. While a considerable proportion of households in Myanmar possess mobile phones, merely 4.1% of children between the ages of 6 and 17 utilize online resources, with enrolled students being twice as inclined to utilize online education compared to their counterparts who have discontinued their studies. The results of this research state that the role of parental support in facilitating students' engagement with online education is paramount, as evidenced by the experiences shared by participants. One student highlighted the invaluable mental and emotional backing provided by their parents saying,

> *My parents especially support me mentally. They allow me to join the courses I want. When I feel depressed, they always encourage me by telling me that I could do it. They appreciate every little success and always guide me to do critical thinking in my school's lessons based on my life experiences. Moreover, they give me time to listen to my opinion. These are the warm support I get from my parents.*

This nurturing environment not only fosters resilience but also empowers students to navigate academic challenges with confidence. Moreover, financial support emerges as a significant aspect of parental involvement in students' education. Another participant recounted the sacrifices made by their father to ensure access to essential resources for online learning, stating,

> *My father said not to worry about financial problems. He would try to support all the necessary things somehow. He sold a cow on our farm to buy me a phone for online learning as well as books and ball pens. He always tells me that all my responsibilities are to do my best to be an educated person one day.*

This anecdote underscores the unwavering commitment of parents to invest in their children's education, even in the face of financial constraints. Furthermore, practical assistance provided by parents plays a crucial role in facilitating students' participation in online education. As one participant shared,

> *My parents do care about me dealing with my education. A Wi-Fi was fixed in our house as I decided to join online school. They help to charge my devices and to fill my mobile phone data too.*

Parental support in emotional, financial, and practical aspects stands as a fundamental pillar for students' success in maneuvering through the challenges of online education. In addition, parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's education, even when they are unfamiliar with the digital learning environment and concerned about their children's safety. One student participant from the survey mentioned,

> *My mother does not understand online learning, as she is not familiar with it. But they support me with mobile data for continuous learning. And then, my parents do care about my security as I attend an online school by NUG.*

Although this mother did not fully understand online learning, she provided the necessary resources like mobile data to ensure her child's continued education. Moreover, when parents send their students to online schools under NUG, not only do the students have security concerns but the parents have them also. The parents support their children's education despite the limitations in their own technological knowledge. The challenges of adapting to new forms of education and navigating safety concerns reflect the resilience of families under difficult circumstances.

Moreover, parental support extends beyond financial assistance and encompasses both emotional and physical care, especially in times of instability. One of the participants highlighted,

> *Although I study by myself dealing with my education, my parents mainly support me financially. Furthermore, when I have to move to new places due to security concerns, they come along with me.*

The role of parents goes beyond simply providing financial support; they also ensure their children's safety and stability during times of conflict. In unstable environments, this form of support is crucial in helping students continue their studies despite the disruptions caused by ongoing conflicts. This support not only boosts students' academic achievements but also fosters a nurturing environment that facilitates holistic development.

Support from Teachers and Schools for Students Continuing Secondary Education in Conflict Areas

Support for secondary education students from conflict areas is a paramount concern for both teachers and school administrations, as highlighted by various initiatives aimed at ensuring continued learning amidst challenging circumstances. The Students Affairs Office plays a crucial role in overseeing the attendance of students from conflict areas, recognizing the unique challenges they face in attending classes regularly. As one teacher noted, *"The office thinks lightly about their attendance based on their pleading to class teachers."*

This flexible approach to attendance management acknowledges the unpredictable nature of their circumstances while ensuring inclusivity in education.

Moreover, teachers actively engage in providing additional support to students who miss significant classroom time due to conflict-related disruptions. Through measures such as revisiting missed lessons, sharing recorded lesson videos, and offering extra instructional time, educators strive to mitigate the impact of prolonged absences on students' academic progress. As expressed by one teacher, *"Teachers have to teach back the lessons the students missed and share the lesson recordings, etc."*

These efforts underscore the commitment of teachers to facilitate continuous learning for students, despite challenges posed by electricity and internet disruptions. One of the teachers

from Bago online school emphasized the significant efforts made by educators to support students from conflict areas in continuing their education despite the challenges they face. She mentioned,

> *When a student informs the class teachers that they have to be displaced, teachers firstly check the safety of the students. At that time, teachers and students negotiate the available time for replaced classes. Moreover, teachers tend to do revision for those students in order to catch up with the lessons they missed.*

The dedication of teachers ensures that students in conflict areas receive the necessary support to continue their education, even under difficult circumstances.

Furthermore, the safety and well-being of students from conflict areas remain a top priority for teachers, who maintain constant vigilance over their circumstances and provide necessary support and reassurance. Teachers actively monitor the situation of these students and collaborate with them to find suitable solutions to any challenges they encounter. Additionally, there is a strong emphasis on fostering a supportive and empathetic environment within the school community, where teachers and students share their difficulties and provide mutual encouragement, as described by one teacher:

> *During one hour of teaching, teachers always investigate students' feelings and encourage each other.*

The commitment to supporting students from conflict areas extends beyond academic considerations. Efforts are made to ensure the continuity of their educational journey even if they temporarily leave the school due to conflict-related displacement. School administrations maintain academic records for these students and facilitate their reintegration into the educational system when they return to a safe environment. As Officer 1 highlighted,

> *Even if the students from our school dropout due to serious conflicts, we keep their academic records.*

It reflects a holistic approach to supporting students' educational needs amidst challenging circumstances. Schools show their dedication to maintaining the educational progress and welfare of students from conflict-affected areas by keeping thorough academic records and assisting in a smooth reintegration into the educational system upon their return to safety.

Minor Challenges for Adapting to the Digital Classroom: Student and Teacher Perspectives on Online Learning Challenges

From the students' perspective, minor challenges arise predominantly from the transition to digital learning formats. With physical textbooks often unavailable in the market, students must rely on PDF files, and although it is accessible, it presents drawbacks such as increased screen time. As one student noted,

> *Since I am joining an online school, I have a lot of screen time. When I have four periods of classes, at least I spend about eight hours a day in front of the screen.*

Consequently, students must strain their eyes and deal with other associated health issues. As a result, they must learn effective time management strategies to mitigate these effects. Conversely, teachers face their own set of challenges in adapting to online teaching methods. The primary concern revolves around classroom management in the virtual setting, particularly difficulty in assessing student comprehension when many students opt to keep their cameras off for security reasons. As one teacher expressed,

> *I was not satisfied with online teaching, as it was hard to assess whether the students understood or not because most of the students closed their cameras due to security.*

And in another interview, one of the teachers from Sagaing online school also highlighted,

> *We cannot get the necessary resources for teaching easily. Due to the security, teachers have to hide their identity that can hinder communication interactively with the students. Consequently, teachers cannot show their identity and cannot share teaching resources like training in the public.*

Everyone who is dealing with online schools under NUG have to hide their identity in public due to security concerns. This hampers teachers' ability to obtain necessary resources and navigate security concerns, ultimately hindering their effectiveness in delivering quality education online.

Additionally, taking attendance, which significantly impacts students' overall scores presents logistical challenges in the online environment. Moreover, the transition to digital teaching resources introduces both advantages and challenges. While the use of keyboards and PDFs streamlines access to curriculum materials, some students face difficulties due to the small font sizes on mobile phone screens.

However, perhaps the most pressing concern for teachers lies in the lack of effective leadership and support systems to address their needs. As one teacher lamented,

> *Another main problem we encounter is strong leadership that draws effective policies and strategies that can support the teachers' living. We lack this kind of support for teachers approaching to solve the teachers' problems.*

There is a need for a collective and strong leadership to solve the problems faced by teachers and students. There is no strong and responsible leadership in charge of the students' and teachers' problems, and as a result, the students, teachers, parents and school officers have to solve problems on their own.

The experiences shared by both students and teachers underscore the multifaceted nature of challenges encountered in the transition to online education, highlighting the need for comprehensive support systems and innovative solutions to ensure the continued success of remote learning initiatives.

Discussion

The results of this primary investigation illuminate the diverse hurdles encountered by individuals involved in secondary education in Myanmar, especially amid ongoing national turmoil, and the shift towards online learning modalities. The discourse encompasses a range of factors, including difficulties with internet access, inconsistencies in electricity supply, apprehensions regarding safety, economic limitations, and the pivotal significance of parental assistance. Security concerns hinder teachers' ability to manage online classrooms as students turn off their cameras, fearing surveillance. This limits engagement and open discussion, especially in conflict zones where students prioritize privacy. School leaders face the challenge of securing online platforms while ensuring a safe, interactive environment for learning. Unreliable internet and electricity further disrupt education, affecting both students' participation and teachers' ability to manage classes effectively. Political instability also worsens economic hardships, raising concerns about the sustainability of education. However, parental support plays a crucial role in helping students overcome these challenges by providing emotional, financial, and practical aid. Overall, this primary research contributes to a better understanding of the challenges surrounding secondary education in Myanmar and underscores the importance of addressing systemic barriers to ensure all students have access to quality learning opportunities, regardless of their socio-economic background or geographical location. By addressing these challenges, policymakers and educators can work towards building a more inclusive and resilient education system.

A significant finding from this research is how a school's decision to collaborate with the National Unity Government's Ministry of Education (NUG's MOE) and adopt its policy of providing free education presents both opportunities and challenges. While the policy aims to benefit students by eliminating financial barriers to education, it introduces significant concerns regarding the sustainability of teacher salaries and the broader viability of schools. One of the online schools has not been recognized by NUG and is trying to register under the MOE of NUG for the recognition of their education. From a student-centric perspective, the policy is commendable. Free education ensures that students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have access to learning without the burden of school fees. This aligns with the NUG's vision of an equitable education system in a country marked by conflict and inequality. In such contexts, education becomes a critical tool for social mobility and long-term national development, and free education is a step towards inclusivity.

However, the implications for teachers, especially those involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), are far less promising. Many teachers rely on their salaries to support themselves and their families. With schools increasingly dependent on donations from parents to cover operational costs, teachers face the possibility of reduced wages. This threatens not only their livelihoods but also the quality and consistency of education delivery. Teachers, particularly those participating in CDM, are already in vulnerable positions, as they cannot seek alternative employment without risking their safety. Thus, for many, teaching is their only option for earning a living.

Moreover, the sustainability of the policy is questionable due to the free education policy of NUG's MOE. Education systems require stable funding to function effectively. According to the result of the schools, under NUG's MOE the school does not receive any financial support from NUG. Once a school has been recognized by NUG, it cannot ask for school fees from the students. For the sustainability of the schools, school leaders ask the parents to donate to the school. When schools are forced to rely solely on donations, their financial future becomes precarious. Donations, by nature, are unpredictable and insufficient to guarantee the long-term success of the school. If schools are unable to provide competitive salaries or basic financial security for teachers, it is likely that many educators will seek alternative employment, thereby depleting the system of skilled and passionate professionals. This outcome would not only compromise the quality of education but also undermine the long-term goals of the NUG's MOE.

The dilemma here reveals a tension between the policy's noble intentions and the harsh realities of resource constraints. While the goal of free education is admirable, the lack of sufficient financial support for teachers risks creating an unstable education system where both students and educators suffer. Policymakers must recognize that the success of free education initiatives relies heavily on the support structures in place for teachers. Without addressing these underlying issues, the very foundation of the policy, providing quality education may be undermined.

One limitation of this research is the lack of information on how the National Unity Government (NUG) distributes its education budget at the national level, though the schools under study receive no financial support. Additionally, since only three schools were selected, and the research relies on qualitative methods, the results may not reflect the situation at the national level. Another challenge is the scarcity of secondary sources on Myanmar's secondary education system following the coup. Further research is needed to develop better solutions.

In conclusion, while the NUG's MOE policy of free education is a progressive step for students, it raises significant concerns about the financial well-being of teachers and the sustainability of schools. Balancing the need for accessible education with the necessity of supporting educators should be a priority for the government and stakeholders, ensuring that both students and teachers can thrive within this new framework.

Conclusion

The overall findings of this research underscore the complex array of challenges facing secondary education in Myanmar, particularly amidst ongoing national crises, and the transition to online learning platforms. From internet connectivity issues to security concerns and financial constraints, stakeholders across the educational landscape grapple with multifaceted obstacles that hinder equitable access to quality education. Addressing these challenges demands concerted efforts from policymakers, educators, parents, and other stakeholders. By implementing targeted interventions such as financial assistance and support programs for students in conflict-affected areas, Myanmar can work towards fostering educational equity and resilience in the face of adversity. Furthermore, future research endeavors should focus on exploring innovative solutions and evaluating the effectiveness of

interventions to ensure sustainable progress toward inclusive and accessible education for all. Through collaborative action and ongoing inquiry, Myanmar can pave the way toward a brighter future for its educational landscape, where every student has the opportunity to accept a post-secondary education.

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Fostering Resilience and Well-Being among Community Leaders Serving Myanmar Migrants in Thailand amidst the Post-Coup Mental Health Crisis

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Abstract

The military coup in Myanmar has caused widespread displacement, leading to a severe mental health crisis among Myanmar migrants in Thailand. Community leaders, such as psychosocial caregivers, social welfare therapists, non-profit administrators, medical and social professionals, teachers, and social workers, frequently put the needs of these migrant populations above their own health and well-being. To address the rising levels of compassion fatigue, burnout, and emotional and physical stress among these leaders, a wellness strategy was implemented. In 2024, the author conducted three retreats for over 50 community leaders in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, and Chompong in Southern Thailand, with a focus on alleviating their compassion fatigue, burnout, and exhaustion. Participants reported experiencing symptoms such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, dissociation, and dysregulated nervous systems. This paper presents the findings from the emotional well-being surveys conducted during these retreats, examines the indicators of emotional regulation, and proposes a plan to enhance resilience and sustainability among community leaders. These groups, responsible for leading and supporting displaced Myanmar populations, often receive little support for their own psychosocial well-being. The paper underscores the importance of understanding intergenerational trauma, epigenetics, collective trauma healing, and neuroscience. This understanding is crucial for developing a progressive and culturally sensitive approach to support these leaders effectively. The paper examines the essential steps to establish circles of compassion and healing to bolster resilience and well-being among community leaders supporting the Myanmar migrant population in Thailand. By focusing on the mental health needs of these leaders, the initiative aims to enhance their capacity to support their communities and improve overall social well-being. Acknowledging the cyclical nature of intergenerational trauma, the paper emphasizes the importance of integrating resilience and compassion into all psychosocial programs to ensure sustainable and effective support for these leaders.

Keywords: Resilience, Compassion Fatigue, Inclusion, Mental Wellness, Societal Health, Social Suffering

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1. Understanding Professional Burnout, Trauma & Well-Being

In a world grappling with immense historical and collective trauma—be it acute, complex, chronic (PTSD), historical, intergenerational, systemic, or environmental (like natural disasters)—it is inevitable. We all suffer from some level of trauma whether we are aware of it or not. Throughout our history, and current time in the world, we have all suffered tremendous loss due to war, conflict, oppression and violence. The result and impact of this level of personal and societal loss create a social fragmentation of the community and the well-being of community survival. No matter the perspective, we use to assess how conflict impacts a society, human suffering remains the constant factor. This type of conflict not only disrupts the social, economic, and overall well-being of individuals but, most critically, also takes a toll on their mental health. According to the National Center for PTSD's 2023 Report, 60% of men and 50% of women will experience at least one trauma in their lifetime. While some individuals may recover within a few months, others might take years, and trauma symptoms can sometimes appear long after the initial event (National Institute of Health, 2024): In a world of billions, the need for communities dedicated to healing and supporting traumatized populations is greater than ever. Healers, therapists, doctors, practitioners, and wellness advocates have committed themselves to aiding a society grappling with complex trauma: The multi-layered suffering experienced by individuals highlights a pressing need in the mental health, wellness, and holistic health fields. Collective trauma can be understood as a psychological response that individuals may experience due to a traumatic event affecting an entire society. This concept extends beyond historical trauma, encompassing the collective memory of a devastating event that impacted a group of people. The psychological condition of individuals is often manifested through severe and persistent symptoms, such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, diminished resilience, and various psychosocial issues (John et al., 2005). Trauma encompasses exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or community violence. This can occur through direct experience, witnessing it happening to others, learning about it affecting a close family member or friend, or experiencing repeated or intense exposure to distressing details of the event (APA, 2013): Common traumatic events include accidents, natural and man-made disasters, conflicts, the sudden death of a close family member or peer, physical or psychological abuse, and witnessing or being a direct victim of family or community violence, as well as acts of war. Thomas Hübl uses the term "intergenerational trauma" to describe the effects of severe, untreated trauma experienced by one or more members of a family, group, or community, which is then passed down from one generation to the next through epigenetic factors (Hübl, 2020). "Historical trauma" refers to a more widespread and enduring form of intergenerational trauma, encompassing the profound and lasting effects of war, imperialism, colonization, domination, subjugation, occupation, enslavement, interventionism, and hegemony. It often emerges from systemic extermination, suppression, or intolerance based on cultural, political, racial, ethnic, religious, gender, or sexual factors. (Hübl, 2020; p.67).

From a neurological perspective, trauma impacts the brain's survival mechanisms, causing it to deviate from its baseline state even after the threat has passed. This alteration in brain chemistry is crucial, as it signifies a fundamental change in how the brain processes

experiences. Trauma profoundly transforms a person's biology into one of ongoing threat, which is reflected in various ways, including alterations in stress hormone levels, immune function, and shifts in the brain's focus and attention. This manifests in several ways, including changes in stress hormone levels, immune system function, and the brain's focus and attention. (Van der Kolk, 2015) When we think about health, we see it as a state of comprehensive well-being—physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social—rather than merely the absence of disease. However, in many global health initiatives, mental health remains neglected. Those with mental health conditions frequently encounter severe human rights violations and discrimination. According to the World Health Organization, more than 80% of individuals with mental health conditions, including those with neurological and substance use disorders, do not have access to quality and affordable mental health. Despite mental health conditions accounting for one-fifth of the total years lived with disability globally and causing over $1 trillion in economic losses each year, it is well known that people with mental health issues often face additional physical health problems, such as HIV, tuberculosis, and noncommunicable diseases. These conditions can contribute to a reduction in life expectancy by 10 to 20 years. Suicide rates are high, with nearly 800,000 deaths per year, disproportionately impacting young people and elderly women in low- and middle-income countries. Mental health conditions are particularly prevalent among those affected by humanitarian crises and other forms of adversity, such as sexual violence (World Health Organization, 2019).

Despite advancements in some countries, many individuals with mental health conditions still lack access to effective mental health and trauma care. In response, the World Health Organization launched the "World Health Organization Special Initiative for Mental Health (2019-2023): Universal Health Coverage for Mental Health" in 2019. This initiative aims to provide quality and affordable mental health care to an additional 100 million people across 12 priority countries (World Health Organization, 2019). One of the ongoing challenges in global mental health is that women constitute over two-thirds of those providing psychological interventions, frequently in unpaid roles (Kohrt, Ottman, Panter-Brick, Konner, & Patel, 2020). A recent World Health Organization report revealed that women make up about 70% of the healthcare workforce but hold only 25% of senior positions (World Health Organization, 2019). This strategic framework aims to provide equitable, gender-inclusive quality care to the most vulnerable populations. It seeks to strike a delicate balance between empowering women within their communities and addressing the unfair exploitation of their labor due to gendered expectations of caregiving. If women are to be relied upon as caregivers, they must be appropriately compensated for their work. Women do not need to take on a greater burden of care when considering the gendered power dynamics of creating health care policies. From 2015 to 2019, only 4% of global healthcare research funding was allocated to mental health, despite mental disorders now being the leading cause of disability worldwide. It is important to distinguish between supporting individuals in managing situations or experiences that lead to anxiety, depression, or posttraumatic symptoms, and addressing issues related to a brain with metabolic dysfunction (Palmer, 2022). Beyond the need to pay attention to the gender issue of inclusion and adversity, education for healthcare workers on any level needs to address the entire framework of the individual. The Institute for Justice and Reconciliation states, whether

individuals or communities experience trauma from exposure to a life-threatening event depends on various factors, including their cultural and social context, the psycho-physiological condition of the individual, emotional experiences, and the meaning attributed to the event by individuals and communities. Analyzing these aspects and their interplay helps us understand why people feel traumatized or attribute specific meanings to their experiences. While everyone may be affected to some extent, most individuals will demonstrate resilience despite exposure to traumatic events (Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, 2015)

Since the Myanmar Military takeover in February 2021, thousands have died or been arrested, and millions have been displaced from their homes and communities. Refugees and displaced individuals along the Thailand-Myanmar border are facing severe mental health issues as a result of the political unrest and military coup. For the affected community, the crisis has exacerbated ongoing mental health concerns and worsened pre-existing conditions. The International Organization for Migration estimates that between four and five million migrants from surrounding countries are currently living and working in Thailand (UNDP, 2023). Official figures from Thailand show that 75 percent of documented migrants are from Myanmar. Given the worsening economic and security conditions, the majority of these migrants, along with the 1.9 million who entered through regular channels, are from Myanmar (MWG, 2023). As of April 2023, an estimated 2.5 million regular migrants are residing in Thailand from Myanmar, Cambodia, and Lao PDR (MWG, 2023). Recent estimates following the military takeover in Myanmar in February 2021 suggest that of the 5 million migrants (both documented and undocumented) in Thailand, the majority are from Myanmar. This is a significant figure given that Thailand's total labor force is around 40 million, while Myanmar's labor force is about 25 million (MWG, 2023). These individuals mainly come to Thailand in search of safety and job opportunities, with many escaping ongoing conflict, economic difficulties, and natural disasters.

2. Myanmar Community Leader Population & Compassion Fatigue

According to Global Giving, over 84+ non-profits in Thailand alone serve the Myanmar migrant community (Global Giving, 2024). As the influx of migrants, refugees, and existing communities continues to grow, the integration of culture, trauma, resources, and survival needs is an ongoing challenge. Mental health and wellness advocates assisting thousands of people are facing significant physical and emotional exhaustion. Due to the urgent and critical needs of the people they support, the community support team often finds itself overlooked or neglected. This group includes community leaders, caregivers, social welfare therapists, non-profit administrators, medical and social professionals, teachers, and social workers. Prioritizing the mental health and well-being of these individuals is crucial for sustaining humanitarian efforts along and within the Thailand-Myanmar border. Prioritizing the fundamental right for these individuals to receive wellness services is the direction needed to create capacity. The community leaders who service the refugee and migrant populations intend to help others and provide compassionate and empathetic care. These individuals play a key role in providing direct assistance to individuals who are rebuilding their lives along with providing services to address the trauma. Besides providing services including education, social services, program services, and medical services, these individuals also inevitably listen,

bear witness to, and to some degree absorb the pain and suffering of their clients. This work involves witnessing a great deal of pain, loss, and despair. It is done by creating a safe space, listening or observing the stories of extreme stress and trauma, or taking compassionate action in times of crisis. The amount of emotional and intellectual focus these caregivers display takes a tremendous amount of resiliency. In addition to the high level of pressure, organizational issues such as high workloads, excessive caseloads, lack of supervision, limited work autonomy, and insufficient professional support contribute to an increased risk of burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and vicarious traumatization. (Akinsulure-Smith et al., 2018; Kulkarni et al., 2013; Rauvola et al., 2019).

Three conditions that affect the mental wellness of these individuals are professional burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. According to the Journal of Traumatic Stress, professional burnout results from chronic work-related stress and is characterized by three primary features: 1) emotional exhaustion; 2) depersonalization and cynicism, which involve a negative attitude towards clients, personal detachment, or a loss of ideals; and 3) feelings of inefficacy, including diminished personal accomplishment and reduced commitment to one's profession (Akinsulure-Smith et al., 2018; Kulkarni et al., 2013). Burnout is often linked to working conditions and organizational stressors, such as long working hours, intense work demands, poor work-life balance, limited work autonomy, unclear expectations, inadequate support or supervision, and a lack of appreciation and reward (Akinsulure-Smith et al., 2018; Kulkarni et al., 2013).

As well, Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS) refers to the stress reactions induced in service providers following exposure to clients' traumatic material. According to S. Figley in "Compassion Fatigue: Toward a New Understanding of the Costs of Caring," compassion fatigue refers to the natural and consequential behaviors and emotions that arise from knowing about the traumatic experiences of a significant other (or client) and the stress that comes from helping or wanting to help a traumatized or suffering person (Figley, 1995). The symptoms of secondary traumatic stress (STS) often have a rapid onset and can closely resemble those of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) experienced by the primary survivor of trauma. These symptoms can be severe and include insomnia, fatigue, hypervigilance, startled reactions, traumatic memories or nightmares related to the client's trauma, chronic irritability or angry outbursts, difficulty concentrating, and avoidance of clients and client situations. Research estimates that the rates of STS among refugee service providers range from 22.9% to 38%, with approximately 8.6% to 11% of these providers exhibiting severe symptoms of STS (as cited in Ebren et al., 2021).

According to the Journal of Traumatic Stress, compassion fatigue is a syndrome that includes symptoms of both secondary traumatic stress and professional burnout. It is characterized by a state of emotional distress and exhaustion, as well as biological, psychological, and social dysfunction (Rauvolua et al., 2019). Secondary traumatic stress often has an immediate onset, while compassion fatigue typically develops cumulatively over time. (Rauvola et al., 2019). Compassion fatigue is a condition marked by emotional and physical exhaustion resulting from prolonged exposure to the suffering or trauma of others. It impacts the workplace by reducing the quality of work, productivity, client attentiveness, and increasing employee turnover. This

condition is commonly associated with professions such as healthcare, social work, and emergency response. Additionally, community leaders, activists, organizers, and volunteers are also vulnerable due to their frequent exposure to the struggles, hardships, and traumatic experiences of community members (Rauvola et al., 2019).

In Myanmar, the stigmatization of mental health issues is already significant, and the situation has worsened since the military takeover in February 2021, with intensified conflict, displacement, and loss of income and livelihoods. As people migrate to Thailand, they bring their trauma with them, placing heavy emotional burdens on local community leaders who provide support. The reports of migrants with high levels of anxiety, depression, isolation, and self-harm are increasing. Yet mental health care services are difficult to access, with safety, transportation limitations, financial resources, and limited technical access. Migrants rely on each other to create strong community relations and social support systems to support their mental well-being. They also rely heavily on the medical, educational, and social services of their immediate communities. There is also a variety of mental wellness programs available in various locations from international and local NGOs. Along with this growing need, community wellness centers are appearing, such as the RISE Center in Mae Sot, Thailand - founded by a community endeavor to address the need and with the support of BEAM Education Foundation. The Rise Center exemplifies how to build community resilience during these challenging times. It highlights the collective effort from medical care services, education, social services and welfare, capacity-building, and public policy partners to support the Myanmar people. The result is an example of what a community wellness & capacity-building center can be with the input and support of the Myanmar community.

The RISE Team collectively strives to implement a well-being and mentally resilient society by educating and responding to the community about mental health and wellness. This involves conducting workshops aimed at reducing self-diagnosis, stigmas, and misinformation about mental health, enhancing self-awareness, and providing well-being programs and GBV responses. It also can offer professional therapeutic help, if necessary. The center is also dedicated to delivering essential capacity-building training to equip the required skills and ethical standards for the mental health practitioners who are supporting their community. It is an example of the growing need to service the migrant community with a well-rounded approach to mental health and psychosocial support and connect with the other community members to network, provide referrals, collaborate, and support each other.

> *For a community to be resilient, we should all be able to do more than simply recover from setbacks; we must also transform physically, emotionally, and socially because of these experiences. This is based on my personal experiences and my work with individuals and communities. To have this commitment, we all share a commitment to support each other, adjust to changing circumstances, and build a foundation that can overcome future challenges. If we work together, think strategically, and believe in our capacity to achieve our goals, we can maintain our collective strength to face any challenges so that ourselves and the community we serve will continue to be resilient*. Wai Phyo Aung, Deputy Director, Beam Education Foundation.

3. The Approach & Framework

In 2024, the author led three retreats for over 50 community leaders in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, and Chompong, focusing on addressing professional burnout, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and physical and emotional exhaustion. Participants reported experiencing symptoms such as fear, stress, anxiety, depression, insomnia, worry, isolation, dissociation, and dysregulated nervous systems. They also faced anger issues and physical ailments including high blood pressure, hypertension, and low levels of physical exercise and activity.

The approach and framework for these retreats focused on the areas of holistic wellness, mind-body connection, stress regulation, and nervous system education. Some workshops focused on the topics of resilience, self-care & self-compassion, mindfulness in the workplace, and the neuroscience of meditation. Each participant was given a personal stress and wellness assessment. New modalities of healing were introduced, such as somatic breathwork, partner yoga, art therapy, and music therapy (sound healing). The goal of these retreats was to give the individuals much-needed rest and space to process and understand the immense amount of stress they accumulated and endured due to their profession and the current circumstances in Myanmar. They are all collectively going through a significant amount of trauma and personally need to learn and practice how to process it all. By supporting and recognizing this population, we can help them to self-advocate for their wellness and teach them the imperative wellness skills to maintain a healthy lifestyle and work-life balance. They also worked on creating more connection and community resilience by engaging and speaking in "circles of compassion," fostering resilience with interactive group dynamics and dyad opportunities to talk about their strengths and weaknesses. The framework was created to embody a holistic approach to individual and collective healing, with many options and opportunities to try new ways of personal process and group processes. Assistance in language translation was provided for Burmese, Thai and any other ethnic language. The retreats were held in nature-based settings, with plenty of natural beauty and a healing environment. The retreats were held over a 4–5-day period with 100% participation required. Participants also had the option of an individual professional therapy counseling session with one of the experts to address any personal issues. The morning meditations were guided and held for 15 minutes every morning with a 15-minute gentle yoga stretching and a 30-minute silent walking meditation. Participants also learned various somatic breathing techniques to help learn how to quickly regulate their nervous systems; these included the complete full belly breath, the 4-count box breath, and the breath of Joy. Guided meditations such as Metta (loving-kindness meditation) were shared to welcome more self-compassion. In the evening, community dinners and an evening meditation with crystal bowl sound healing and Tibetan bowls helped to integrate and process a restful sleep cycle. For many of the participants, this was the first time that they were able to go on a wellness retreat and explore these new skills of self-care. Almost all the activities were done with 'inclusion' in mind, without the structure of a typical 'classroom setting' and sharing happened in a circle and with equal sharing time for all. Participants were encouraged to voice their experience, whether in their journals, in the group sharing or with each other, or in a personal one-on-one session. It was relieving to witness the participants conversing amongst themselves, looking eye to eye, listening intently, and allowing each other to cry, laugh, and

share moments of connection and humility. The value of mixing the individuals into random ethnic groups and genders was vital to encourage a stronger connection with each other. By consistently mixing the groups, it allowed the participants to practice and cultivate compassion, and empathetic listening and see past their differences. There was also plenty of time to learn how to communicate and connect non-verbally, through silent walking meditation, silent journaling time, and art therapy time.

Here are somatic therapies that were introduced:
Breathing Techniques. Breathing techniques are crucial, as understanding the importance of breath awareness can be a key takeaway. When we begin to feel anxious, upset, or uncomfortable, our breathing often becomes faster and shallower. Learning to deepen our breath into our bellies—known as diaphragmatic or belly breathing—can help counteract these changes and promote relaxation. Learning to deepen our breath into our bellies, known as diaphragmatic or belly breathing, is crucial. This technique involves consciously noticing and changing our breathing rate. By breathing long and deep into the belly, we signal to the brain and body that we are safe. As we inhale, we push the belly out, and as we exhale, we pull the belly in. Breathing techniques are simple yet powerful tools for quickly resetting the nervous system and can be practiced for just two to three minutes a day.

Grounding Techniques. Similarly, when feeling overwhelmed, stressed, or in distress, grounding techniques can help us calm down. Grounding allows us to regain a sense of safety in our bodies and brings us back to the present moment. By feeling safe, we enhance our ability to tolerate uncomfortable feelings and emotions. Grounding techniques are short-term strategies that can be used anywhere and anytime we feel triggered or overwhelmed. They are essential for shifting our attention to safety and away from triggers, flashbacks, and challenging emotions

Relaxation Techniques. Incorporating relaxation techniques to support the body's natural relaxation response can be a powerful skill. These techniques help manage stress by slowing down breathing and heart rate, lowering blood pressure, alleviating over-thinking, and restoring balance to both the body and mind.

Self-care. One of the most crucial areas to focus on is self-care. By integrating self-care, we can enhance our wellness and build resilience and capacity. Self-care involves engaging in activities and practices regularly and intentionally to reduce stress and maintain and improve our overall health and well-being. Self-care is not an indulgence, a reward for hard work, or a form of pampering. Instead, it is essential for our overall health and for effectively providing care and services to clients. Self-care encompasses activities that offer distraction and personal growth, such as journaling or spending time in nature, as well as those that promote fun, rest, and relaxation, like exercise, adequate sleep, or gardening.

Mindfulness. The introduction to Mindfulness as a self-care practice came from my teacher, Jack Kornfield's work. Jack Kornfield, Ph.D. trained as a Buddhist monk in the monasteries of Thailand, India, and Burma. He has taught meditation internationally since 1974 and is one of the key teachers to introduce Buddhist mindfulness practice to the West. Jack Kornfield's description of Mindfulness is Mindfulness, through its open and compassionate attention, frees

us from reacting to and being entangled by the world's challenges. Instead, we offer the world our peaceful heart. By responding with care and courage, we embody the presence and liberation we hope for everyone. This practice, often referred to as mindfulness, allows us to contribute from a place of inner peace and strength (Kornfield, 2008). Decades of neuroscience research have shown that mindfulness practice can effectively ease stress, control anxiety and depression, and enhance cognition, focus, and memory. By systematically practicing mindfulness, we can cultivate positive states of mind such as kindness, generosity, steadiness, and love. Mindfulness helps quiet the mind and heal the heart by increasing awareness of our internal states and surroundings. Mindfulness helps individuals avoid destructive or automatic habits and responses by teaching them to observe their thoughts, emotions, and experiences without judgment or reaction. A solid mindfulness practice empowers us to approach any situation wisely, be fully present, and act with compassion. From this mindful presence, a sense of gratitude naturally emerges (Kornfield, 2008).

With daily, consistent body-mind practices, participants were able to cultivate presence and mindfulness. They became more aware of their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors that contribute to stress and anxiety. One example of practicing mindfulness is through the awareness of the five senses: what you see, feel, hear, touch, and smell.

Participants were asked to notice their five senses during the morning walking silent meditations. Pay mindful attention to the five senses.

Notice five things that you can see with your eyes. Look around and bring your attention to five things you would not normally notice.

Notice four things that you can feel. Bring your awareness to four things you are currently feeling, like the texture of your pants, the feeling of the breeze on your skin, or your feet moving as you walk.

Notice three things that you can hear. Listen to the sounds of your surroundings. What can you hear? This might be a bird singing, the low hum of nature, or traffic nearby.

Notice two things that you can smell. Tune your senses into the smells around you, whether pleasant or unpleasant.

Notice one thing that you can taste. Focus on one thing you can taste right now, at this moment. You can notice the current taste in your mouth, by swallowing or even opening the mouth and taking a taste of air.

Throughout the various retreats, all the participants were encouraged to understand and implement these 13 learning strategies for their own mental resilience and emotional well-being.

13 Learning Strategies for Fostering Resilience and Well-Being among Community Leaders:

1. Self-Care Practices: Prioritize your self-care activities such as exercise, meditation, hobbies, nature, and spending time with loved ones. Engage in activities that promote relaxation and rejuvenation. Help your nervous system regulate itself with plenty of rest,

detox time, and self-care.

2. Set Clear Boundaries (or learn how): Establish clear boundaries around your time, energy, and emotional investment in your work. Recognize your limitations and learn to say no when necessary to avoid burnout and overwhelm. Find support in this area if you need it.

3. Seek Support and Consultation: Build a support network of colleagues, friends, mentors, and mental health professionals who can provide emotional support, guidance, and validation. Attend support groups or seek individual counseling, if needed. Regularly consult with supervisors, mentors, or mental health professionals to discuss challenging cases, debrief after difficult situations, and gain perspective on your work-life balance.

4. Practice Mindfulness: Learn the four pillars of Mindfulness: Mindfulness of Body, Mindfulness of Emotions, Mindfulness of Thoughts, and Mindfulness of Sensations. Implement this into your daily life, and practice staying in the present moment.

5. Monitor Emotional Well-being: Regularly check in with yourself to assess your emotional state and recognize early signs of professional burnout, secondary traumatic stress, and compassion fatigue. Notice the feelings of emotional numbness, irritability, or cynicism. Take proactive steps to address these symptoms.

6. Limit Exposure to Traumatic Content: While staying informed is important, it is also important to limit exposure to distressing news or traumatic content, especially before bedtime, to avoid exacerbating stress and anxiety.

7. Engage in Meaningful Activities: Bring balance to challenging or emotionally draining tasks with activities that bring joy, fulfillment, and a sense of purpose. Focus on projects or initiatives that align with your values and passions.

8. Educate Yourself: Increase your understanding of compassion fatigue, trauma-informed care, and resilience-building techniques through workshops, training programs, books, and online resources.

9. Reflect and Process: Create opportunities for reflection and processing of challenging experiences through journaling, talking with trusted colleagues, or participating in peer supervision groups. Take time to acknowledge your emotions, process difficult experiences, and identify areas where you may need additional support or growth.

10. Celebrate Successes: Acknowledge and celebrate the positive impact of your work within

the community. Recognize your contributions and the achievements of your team or organization to boost morale and motivation.

11. Cultivate Resilience: Develop resilience-building skills such as problem-solving, adaptability, optimism, and gratitude to navigate adversity and maintain a sense of hope and efficacy.

12. Take Breaks and Rest: Prioritize adequate rest by scheduling regular breaks, vacations, and downtime to recharge physically and mentally.

13. Practice Cultural Humility: Approach the work with humility, openness, and a willingness to learn from the varied ethnic communities served. Cultivate an attitude of appreciation and respect towards their experiences, challenges, perspectives, and ability to overcome obstacles with resilience. Be mindful of language, body language, and conscious listening.

4. The Findings & Challenges

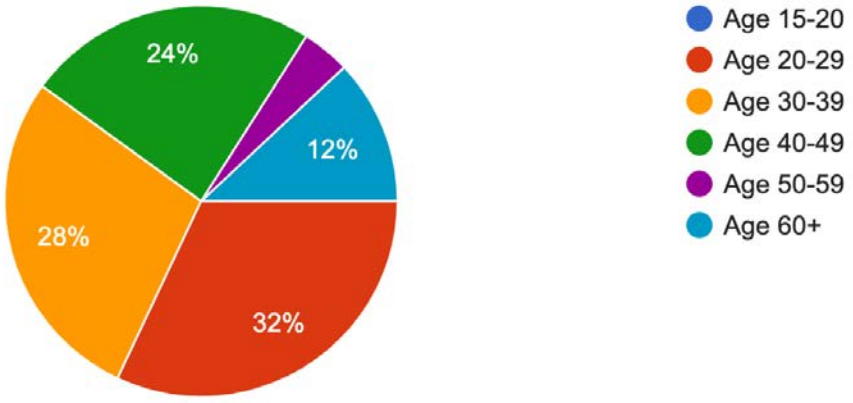
The key factors measured were participants' ability to assess their wellness across various domains, including stress indicators, mental wellness, emotional wellness, physical wellness, self-care, compassion fatigue, and resiliency. Participants were encouraged to incorporate new body-mind practices and concepts, and they expressed interest in ongoing learning. Minor adjustments to technology use during the retreats were emphasized, including informing friends, family, and work about their participation in a 'wellness retreat' to manage expectations and prioritize their health.

Challenges for these groups appeared in several ways.

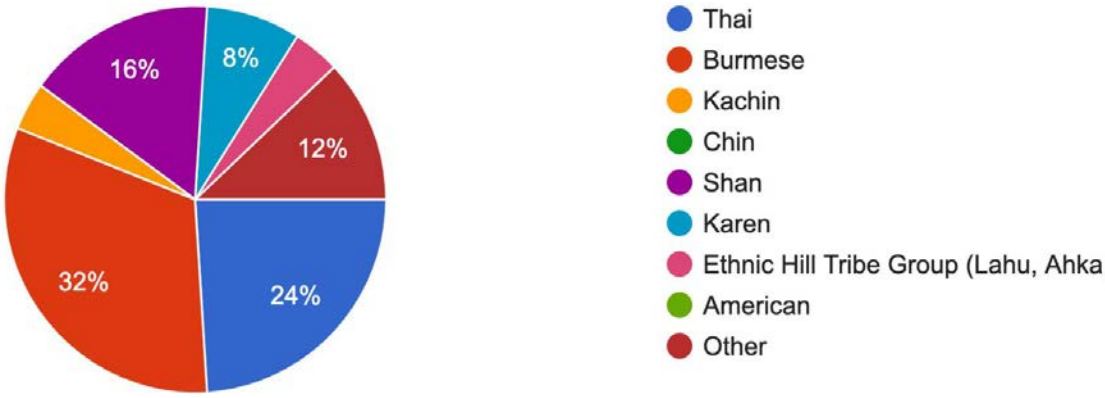
- Safe transportation to the retreat location, and weather was a factor.
- Allocating enough time and clearing work and home schedules.
- Language and creating translations in the handouts for Thai, Burmese, and other ethnic languages, if needed.
- Allocating more time to translate, educate, and inform the participants on the content to ensure understanding of the material with proper translation.
- Scheduling enough breaks and rest time to integrate; setting aside time for reflection
- Encouraging group participation, connection, and mixing of genders and ethnicities frequently to create more community resiliency.
- On-time attendance for all classes, workshops, and activities was required unless excused. *This was challenging for a variety of reasons; low interest in activity, taking work calls, and unknown absence.

Figures

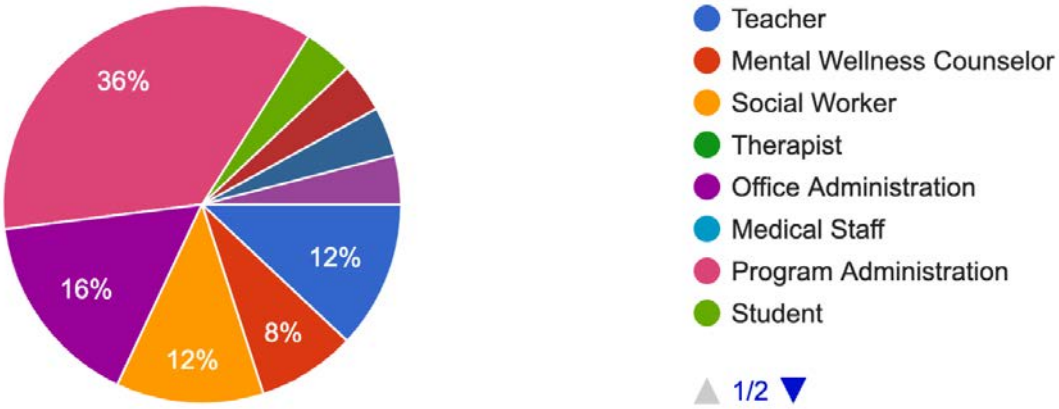
The age range for all three retreats was between 20-60+yrs old.



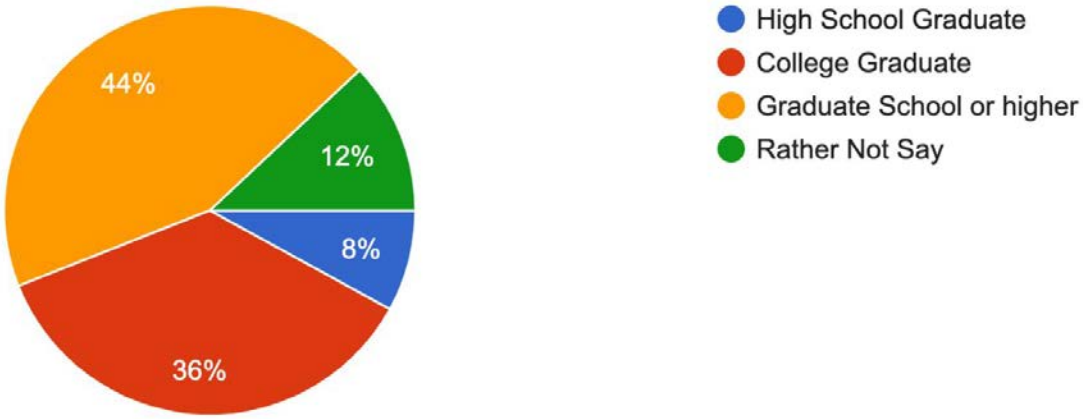
Within the groups, the following Myanmar ethnic populations were present: Burmese, Mon, Kachin, Chin, Shan, Karen, Thai, Ethnic Hill Tribe Group (Lahu, Ahka), American, and New Zealand.



Most participants are currently located in the areas of Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, and Yangon. The following professional backgrounds were present: Office Administration, Program Administration, Teacher/Educator, Social Worker/Counselor, Mental Health Counselor, Therapist, Student, and medical personnel.

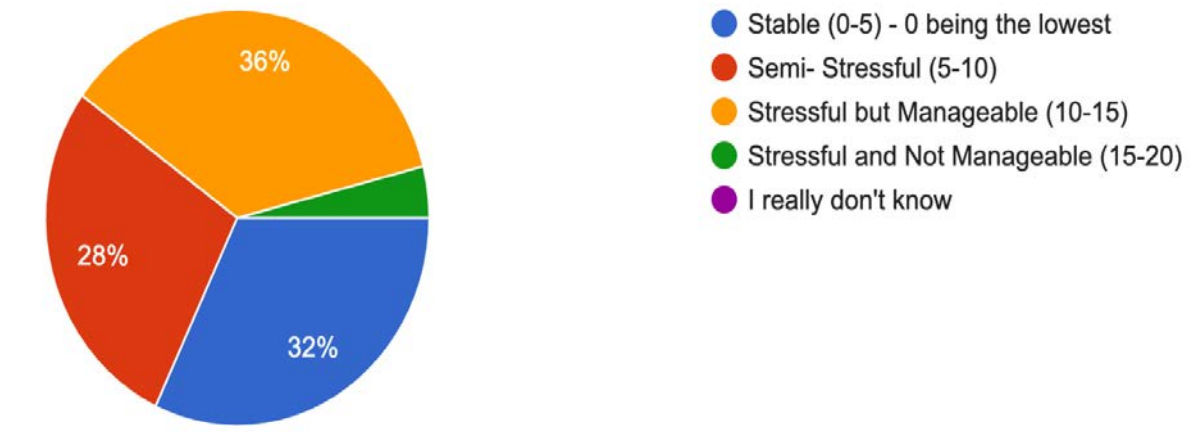


Education level was bachelor's degree to Doctorate level.

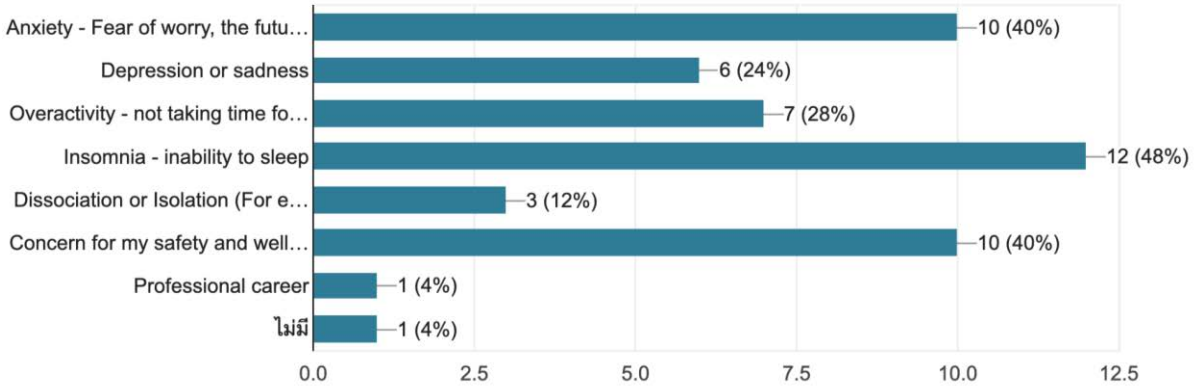


Gender Analysis

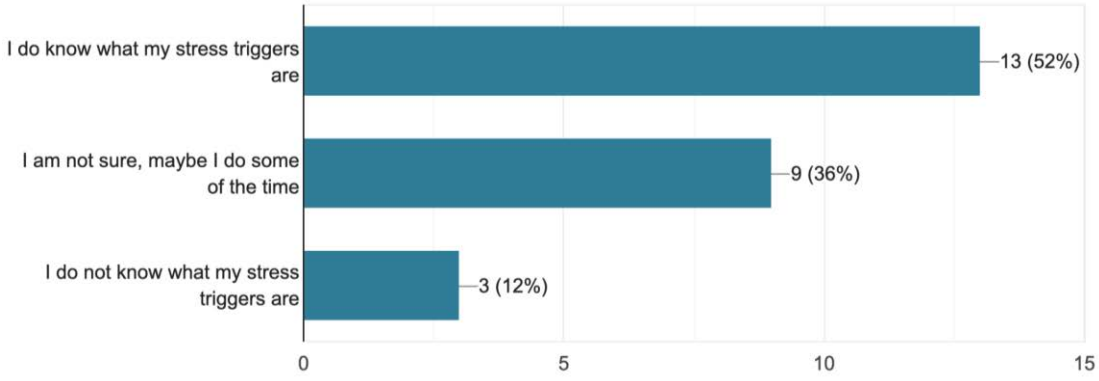
How is your Mental Wellness?



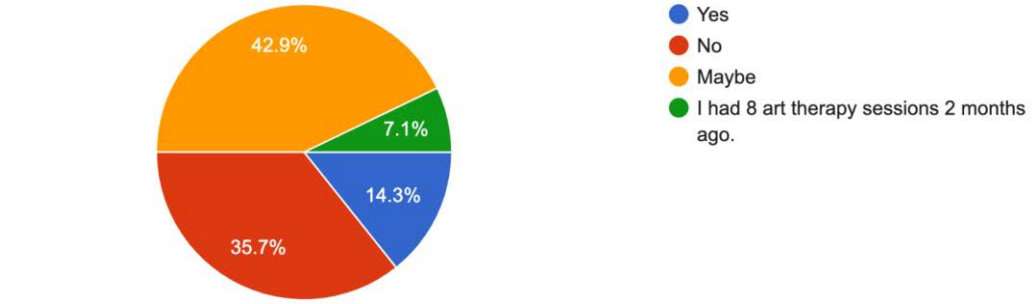
What are your stress triggers? If you know you have stress, how do you manage your stress and how does it stress affect you? (*click as many as you need to).



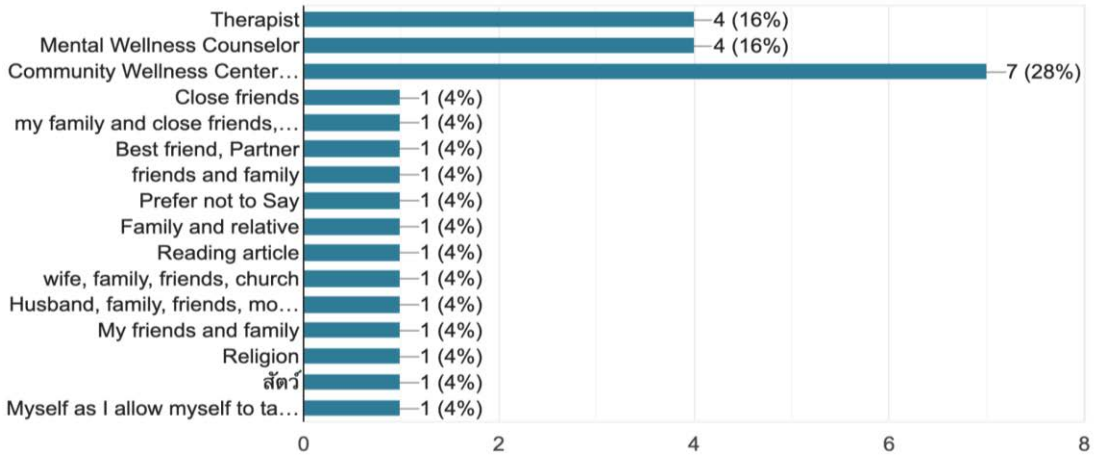
Do you know what your stress triggers are?



Do you practice meditation, yoga, somatic therapy, or counseling/therapy?

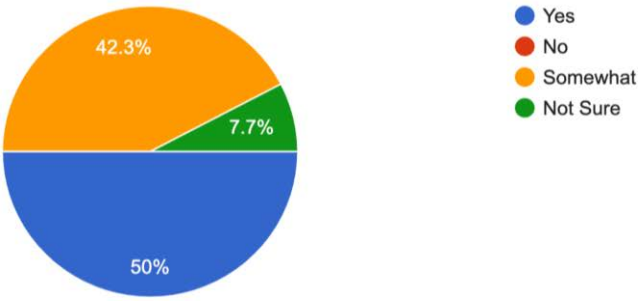


Who is your support system? Therapist? Mental Wellness Counselor? Community Activities?



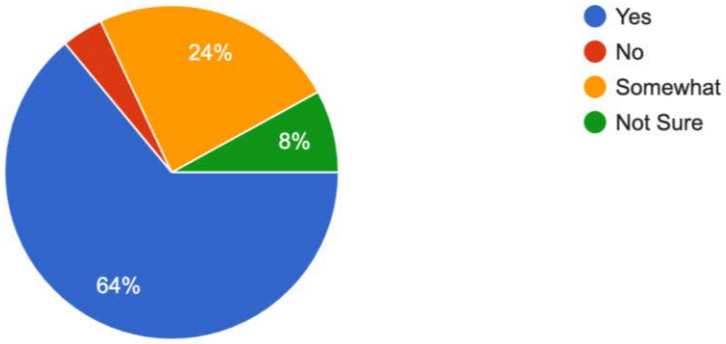
After the retreats:

Were you able to address any STRESS or BURNOUT (compassion fatigue?)



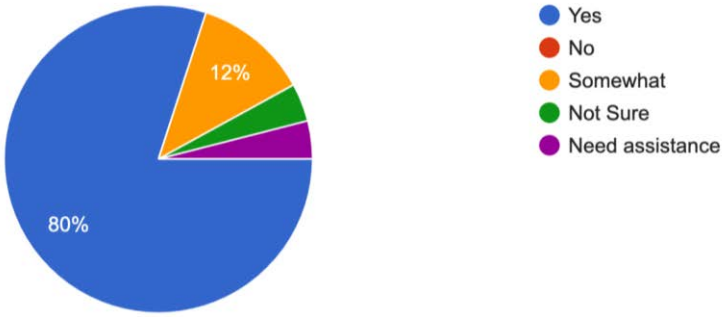
92.3% were able to address stress or burnout completely or somewhat.

Were you able to address, learn, and apply SELF-COMPASSION?



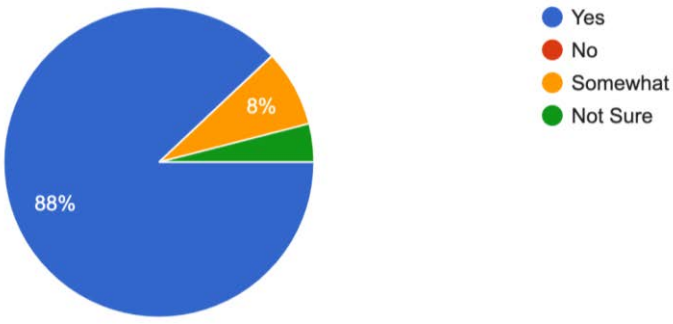
88% indicated they were able to learn and apply Self-Compassion practice completely or somewhat

Were you able to address, learn, and apply MINDFULNESS?



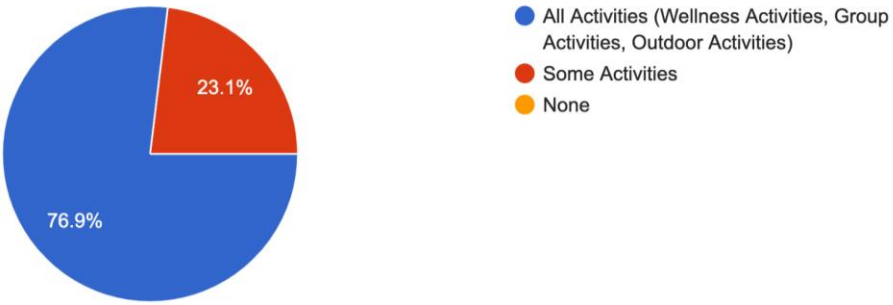
92% said they were able to learn and apply Mindfulness Meditation completely or somewhat

Were you able to address, learn, and apply SELF AWARENESS & BOUNDARIES?



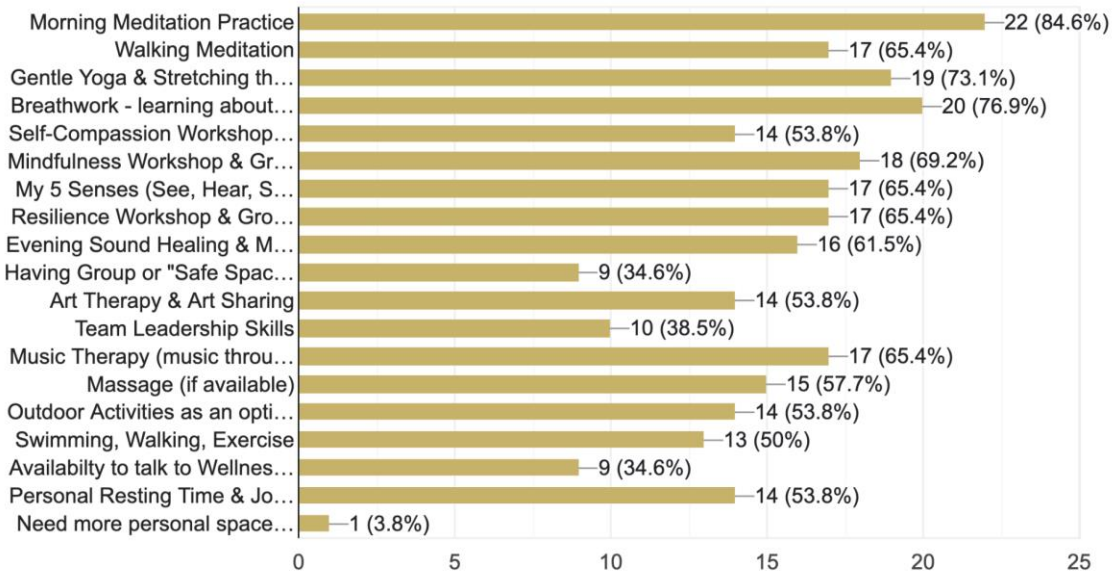
96% said they were able to learn and apply Self-Awareness & Boundaries completely or somewhat

Participation in activities



- 80.8% indicated this wellness retreat was helpful for their job.
- 84.6% indicated this wellness retreat was helpful for their mental wellness.
- 77.0% indicated it was helpful for their physical wellness.
- 92.3% indicated it was helpful for their emotional wellness.
- 92.3% found the retreat valuable for their community leaders and entire organization programs and departments present during the retreat to make connections and share experiences.
- 84.5% indicated they felt more connected to their team members and organization members after the retreat.
- 73.2% indicated it would be valuable to have resilience retreats with other organizations in the community to foster more connection and resiliency.

Please click all activities that were valuable in your experience (click all that apply).



* Findings from 2023-2024 three retreats for over 50+ community leaders in Chiang Mai, Mae Sot, and Chompong, that the author conducted.

5. Fostering Resilience & Well-Being among Community Leaders

Establishing a framework of inclusion and diversity in healing programs for community leaders enhances the opportunity to foster resilience and well-being for everyone involved. Taking a deliberate 'pause' during a crisis to conduct a wellness 'check-in' can positively and sustainably impact the entire community. The result will be a calm and resilient individual who can support a traumatic population with compassionate care. These findings, which revealed the high level of stress and neglect of mental wellness capacity for these individuals were apparent. They were all suffering from professional burnout and compassion fatigue. The importance of addressing the mental well-being of these individuals needs to be a stronger priority. The value of these types of retreats for community leaders can help to bridge the collective approach to trauma and self-care within the community. With hundreds, if not thousands, of individuals supporting the well-being of thousands of Burmese refugees and migrants, this issue must be addressed to provide sustainability and capacity for collective care. Renowned black feminist scholar, Bell Hooks, emphasized the need for inclusive communities where everyone's voice is heard and respected (Hooks, 2008). This inclusion concept should be a foundational framework to build and create future wellness programs to ensure societal health. For collective society healing to take place, diversity and inclusion must not be overlooked. A healthy community will aspire to foster and create a sense of belonging among all its members.

Another area lacking acknowledgment or focus was the issue of gender, the gap specifically for the LGBTQIA+ community, and specifically for men's health. All three retreats were mixed-gendered, but a follow-up question was presented if participants would be interested in gender-specific options: women, men, and LGBTQIA+. Most of the findings resulted in a positive response for participation of mixed groups as well as gender-specific groups and LGBTQIA+ groups in order to address more specific topics, if available. Other areas to consider as to develop and foster frameworks that will benefit this approach is to include the following concepts into wellness frameworks that work across a diverse population that may or may not intersect in areas of education or ethnicity. The purpose is to broaden the framework to include shared humanity concepts of belonging, unity and gratitude.

Here are some areas that can be incorporated into future frameworks:

Cultural Humility & Sense of Belonging - Cultural humility and a sense of belonging involve an ongoing process of self-exploration and a willingness to learn from others. It brings attention to the importance of honoring another culture, tradition, values customs, and beliefs. Every person has their own culture, their way of knowing, and their wisdom that can be shared in a group process. A sense of belonging comes in the ways we intersect with each other or individually are included and honored.

Language - The influence of language—both spoken and unspoken—is profound. Given the diverse ethnicities and language barriers present, being mindful of language is crucial. Encouraging participants to engage in non-verbal connections, such as meditating together, practicing mindful movement and dance, sharing silent meals, engaging in empathetic listening, silent walking meditation, and participating in art therapy projects involving color,

can be very effective. When translation is necessary, it is important to allocate the time and resources to provide this service.

Safety and Creating a Safe Space - Creating a sense of safety within a group is a delicate and intentionally crafted process, particularly when the group is dealing with significant personal and collective trauma. The initial priority is to establish a secure environment for everyone involved. This involves considering various approaches, with a strong emphasis on gathering input from the group. It is crucial to define what safety means for everyone, encompassing physical, emotional, and psychological aspects.

Empathetic Listening in Circles of Compassion - This approach enables participants to embody the role of 'support' by simply listening, refraining from offering advice or suggestions, and creating a safe space for others to engage in their personal processes.

Social Support - Expand the Community through Unity and Gratitude. As we acquire knowledge, we enhance our self-awareness and gain the ability to make significant changes in our own lives, which can also create a positive ripple effect on those around us. For fostering enduring resilience, it is essential to focus on diversity and inclusion while maintaining a strong dedication to self-care. This approach not only strengthens individual well-being but also enriches the collective experience, creating a more supportive and empathetic community. Community leaders and service providers who establish strong personal and professional support networks are less prone to experiencing work-related stress and trauma and are more likely to find greater satisfaction in their roles and lives. Consequently, it is crucial for community leaders to intentionally develop support systems that bolster both personal and professional well-being through meaningful connections. Offering ongoing opportunities for community leaders to focus on inclusivity will positively impact their communities, enhancing overall resilience. By nurturing a sense of unity and belonging, we foster gratitude and promote a deeper sense of well-being.

Given the ongoing global refugee and migrant crisis in Myanmar, community leaders and service providers face an increased risk of professional burnout, secondary traumatic stress, compassion fatigue, and various physical and mental health challenges. This situation highlights the urgent need for comprehensive support and self-care strategies to help them manage these pressures effectively. This work can be incredibly rewarding, meaningful, and transformative for those who successfully manage work-related stressors. To maintain a sense of purpose, individuals must also receive consistent support for their mental health and overall wellness. The research highlights the power of resilience and demonstrates what is achievable through collective care.

"I've seen among activists I've worked with—you will burn out. But if that same compassion and care comes instead from the power of love and steadiness and a deep devotion to what is just and right, it has equal if not greater power" (Kornfield, cited in Gregoire, 2024). "Mahatma Gandhi took one day a week to be in silence, even amid marches of thousands and the ending of the British colonial empire. Even during a time of huge transformation, he would say, 'I'm sorry, this is my day of silence.' He would sit, quiet himself, and try to listen to his deep center of wisdom to offer the most compassionate, skillful, and powerful response possible. So rather

than removing us from the world, silence allows us to affect the world in a different, and in many cases, more profound way" (Kornfield, cited in Gregoire, 2024).

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Historical Perspectives on Agriculture and Biodiversity: The Role of Royal Orders during the *Konbaung* Era

Maw Maw Aye[27]

Abstract

This paper examines the role of monarchs in agricultural expansion and their attempts to plan for food security and environmental conservation during the *Konbaung* era in Myanmar. It mainly analyses the contents of the Royal Orders issued by the palaces in the 19th century against the backdrop of the impoverished socio-economic life of the people and political instability. While revisiting analyses of the Royal Orders by notable historians, other reliable literature in Burmese was also explored. It suggests that most of the kings in *Konbaung* were concerned about the stability of an economy mainly based on agriculture, which was experiencing a dramatic transition from a subsistence economy to commercial farming. Rural agricultural livelihood was a main source of royal income, forming part of the revenue from both local and foreign trade in the late *Konbaung* era. While most of the monarchs keenly promoted the idea of cash crops, they also intended to build legitimacy by symbolically performing the role as "Farmer King." Preservation of wildlife was part of religious tradition and served the political purpose of creating a virtuous king, in accordance with the traditional Buddhist belief in the "ten virtues of the King." The ceremonial role the kings played in the Royal Ploughing Ceremony can be considered a propaganda tool to shape positive public opinion towards the king, despite deep impoverishment in rural regions.

Keywords: Agriculture, Environmental conservation, Land, Royal Order

Introduction

Myanmar is primarily an agricultural country, and rice is the staple food for its people. The natural diversity of Myanmar provides fertile arable soil, ample water resources, a rich natural resource endowment, and extensive forest coverage. The Third Myanmar Empire of *Konbaung* dynasty, which lasted for 133 years, witnessed the reign of eleven kings in total. The political power of the King was stronger in the early years of the dynasty, as well as its economy, especially within the period between 1752 and 1819 (Toe Hla, 2008). However, signs of economic growth came to an end during the late *Konbaung* period as the political power started to wane after the first two decades of the 19th century (1819-1885) (Myo Myint, 2012). The political center of *Kongbaung* kings was located in Upper Myanmar cities, and *Shwebo*, *Inwa*, *Amarapura*, *Kyaukmyaung*, and *Mandalay* were names of the old capitals. In those areas, rainfall was always scanty. As rice was the main item in the daily diet of the Myanmar people,

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[27] Independent Researcher

inventing the dry zone for rice growing areas was one of the most crucial projects of the Kings. Therefore, the irrigation system was the foundation for cultivating rice, and most of the Kings concentrated on the construction of irrigation canals, lakes, dams, and reservoirs within their realms. However, *Konbaung* Monarchs were not the pioneers in building irrigation infrastructure. Starting from *Anawratha* of the Bagan dynasty and continuing with successive Myanmar kings, there was great effort to maintain well-functioning irrigation systems in Upper Myanmar (Toe Hla, 2004).

Rice was extensively grown in the four granaries of Upper Myanmar—*Shwebo*, *Madaya*, *Kyaukse*, and *Minbu* Townships. Lower Myanmar also produced a large amount of rice due to sufficient rainfall and fertile soil suitable for paddy cultivation. That is why central Myanmar was not free from economic pain in those days. Before the *Konbaung* era, war with neighboring countries was a constant pattern and the *Inwa* Kings' neglected to concentrate on improving dams and reservoirs despite damage. Consequently, most of the farmlands were flooded in A.D. 1741 in the *Inwa* capital. Due to this disaster, people faced drought and famine in the following year, A.D. 1742. During the famine, riot and looting occurred in many parts of the country, which made people panic more amidst this unsettling time.

During this time of revolt, the Kings first had to suppress the rebels and then sought to cure the root of the problem, which was hunger and food insecurity. During the war years in the middle of the 18th century, there were not enough crops produced in the granary areas of *Inwa* due to insufficient labor and water shortage. In many cases, the palace could not provide rice ration to the soldiers who fought at the frontline in the war against enemies from *Pegu* in A.D. 1751. Because of these unstable conditions, the *Inwa* city-state finally fell to the hands of *Hantharwaddy* in March 1752 (Toe Hla, 2008). Therefore, *Konbaung* Kings had to make extra effort in cities of Upper Myanmar to repair the past damage that resulted in areas that did not enjoy abundant rainfall for cultivation. Realizing the needs of water in dry geographical terrain, some monarchs built infrastructure for agriculture, such as reservoirs, canals, and dams. One outstanding achievement of this era was the establishment of protected zones for animals to support biodiversity conservation.

Under the absolute monarchy system, *Konbaung* Kings could force the people, including peasants, to serve in the royal army in times of emergency. This was especially the case in times of territorial war in the whole country and military campaigns. During this time, the peasants faced serious economic hardship and most of them were in debt. According to several Royal Orders released by the palaces, some of the Kings were seriously concerned about the debt problem of the people and tried to make laws to abolish national debts. These political acts were highly appreciated by historians, praising the Kings' effort as if they only acted out of mercy for the people. On the other side, agriculture was also the foundation of the King's income too. To develop agriculture and domestic and external trade, the rulers issued Royal Orders to update agricultural systems (Toe Hla, 2008).

Under absolute monarchy, it was predominant practice that every speech of the King became orders for his citizens. The liaison officer who relayed orders of the kings to the person concerned recorded the King's orders. It is noted that the date and name of the liaison officer were mentioned in each Royal Order. These Royal Orders are not daily digest but are regarded

as oral history (Than Tun, 2011). Royal Orders were instructions made by the Kings on what they wanted to be done or the methods of how it should be done (Than Tun, 1983). Some of them were orders that would affect the whole kingdom, such as a declaration of war, while some were related to an individual concerned, such as a slave who was granted freedom from slavery. Sometimes, a piece of the royal order dealt with one episode while other times it dealt with several things on a single sheet.

The emphasis of a particular order largely depended on the individual taste or style of the King; however, these orders also reflected the social and cultural situations of the people. As the King wielded absolute power, his statements were prescribed as law despite the fact that the King seldom went against tradition or religious norms (Than Tun, 1983). Based on numerous historical documents including the Royal Orders, the state of agricultural livelihood and the King's concern for farmers' lives and sustainability are examined through the following research questions.

- Did the *Konbaung* kings prioritize the advancement of agriculture and sustainability?
- How do the Royal Orders illustrate the *Konbaung* Kings' political consolidation through the enhancement of farmers' livelihoods?

Methodology

As a historian, I conducted this research by using a historical research approach. The work of a historian is mainly to focus on studying the individuals and societies regarding their behaviours, motives, fears, hopes, aspirations, experiences, etc. (The People's University, n.d.). Goldhor described the nature of historical research as an approach that focused on "analyzing and interpreting the meanings of historical events" and is "a process by which a researcher is able to reach a conclusion as to probable truth of an event in the past by studying objects available for observation in the present" (Goldhor, 1972). As guided by the historical research approach, numerous Royal Orders about the administration, appointment, religion, economy, culture, foreign relations, etc. were largely examined in this study. However, this research analysis especially highlights the Royal Orders particularly concerning agriculture and environmental conservation. This analysis also examined other archival documents and records of events that were used by other historian works to reconstruct the past events based on my findings in the agricultural sector and environmental efforts of the Kings.

Overview of Previous Literature on the Importance of the Royal Orders

There are numerous historical documents in both Myanmar and English concerning the *Konbaung* period. Among them, The Royal Orders of Burma (A.D. 1598-1885), edited, compiled, translated, and annotated by Dr. Than Tun, consists of ten volumes with Vol. III to Vol. X focusing on the *Konbaung* period. These volumes are reliable sources for investigating the Royal Orders issued by the *Konbaung* monarchs. These ten volumes of Royal Orders are useful for any historian who wants to focus on the *Konbaung* period. There is a gap of literature due to some research areas not being fully explored or addressed, especially food insecurity of the people and the Kings' reactions to the needs in the agricultural sector in those days.

Identifying these gaps by reading previous research (Aung Zaw Myint, 2019; Mi Mi Hlaing, 2019; Wai Wai Hein, 2018) helped me determine where further study was needed and guided the direction of my research. Many of them aimed at helping next generation researchers to further explore research areas, especially around four topics including political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of Myanmar. In examining the socio-economic life of the *Konbaung* era, Toe Hla provided valuable historical insights into the agricultural conditions prior to the *Konbaung* dynasty, as well as the political, administrative, economic, and social aspects throughout the entire *Konbaung* period (Toe Hla, 2008, 2011, 2014). Toe Hla used *thakarit* (land mortgage), *Parabaik* (writing tablet made of paper, cloth, or metal in the form of accordion folds), *pyou* (poem of epic proportions), *lanka* (verse), and other literature to study the socio-economic life of the *Konbaung* era in his compiled books. Under the influence of his works, I compared and contrasted the socio-economic conditions of rural people under different kings.

By looking at the specific dates of events shown in different Royal Orders, it also helped me compare the local historical chronology with international trends and transformations of society in those days. While noting how local events took place, I could also analyze the influence and divergences between the local and international events, especially in the changes of agricultural society in the late *Konbaung* era. Myo Myint (2012) provides valuable insight regarding the royal efforts of agricultural development during the reign of King *Mindon*. In similar chronological analysis, Khin Maung Nyunt (2003) and the Myanmar Agenda 21 (1997) detail the historical outline of the Myanmar environmental conservation and Kings' ideas.

The ceremonial and political role of the Kings in agriculture is highlighted in Maung Maung Tin's study (Maung Maung Tin, 2020; Shwe Yoe, 1896), Myanmar Encyclopaedia Vol. XII (1972) and the article by Khin Maung Nyunt (1997). These documents proved how the King played a role as head of the State by performing religious rituals to emphasize his leadership in securing people's welfare. Some scholars emphasized the cultural and religious aspects of the Royal Ploughing ceremonies, but I tend to review their roles as leaders who happened to consolidate political legitimacy by stressing the virtue of the Kings, as defined by religious and traditional norms.

In short, a chronological review of the *Konbaung* dynasty's history provides insight into the role of religious propaganda, the Kings' steps to take reforms in the late *Konbaung* era, and their subsequent changes in administrative and economic policy. The push factors coming from the industrialization of agriculture and drastic social changes from the British occupied Burma are also noteworthy. These valuable documents support my main argument which is "Why does the King seriously need to care to fulfil the Royal duties to promote the wellbeing of the people by improving agricultural sector and environmental sustainability?"

1. The State of Agriculture in Konbaung Era

During the *Konbaung* era, arable land was abundant, and the population was sparse. Moreover, the livelihood of farmers was assisted by two major changes. One was the right to create new farmlands as land ownership, and the other was the royal support irrigation system (Toe Hla, 2004). Although all eleven *Konbaung* rulers had to deal with food security issues for the

country, *Badon Min* was the one who gave the most attention to agriculture in the early *Konbaung* era and *Mindon Min* was notable for improving agricultural conditions in the late *Konbaung* period.

Throughout the *Konbaung* period, a large number of farmers had debt problems and took out loans against the agricultural land (*Thakarit*), which was a very common practice to finance agricultural operations and surviving day-to-day struggles. According to historical records, the general socio-economic conditions suggest that cultivators suffered from poor conditions. Presumably, three main factors shaped the poor socio-economic situations of the people: firstly, concentration on the subsistence economy access to modern cultivation methods was lacking; secondly, an authoritarian feudal political system; and lastly, frequent wars with neighboring states, which demonstrated that the biggest expenditure was for military purposes and not agricultural development.

Regardless of the rise and fall of the Nation's economy, land was the primary form of wealth for the King and it remained as State property in an aristocratic economy. During the *Konbaung* era, land was classified as *Aya Daw Mye* (Royal Land), *Wuttakan Mye* (Religious Land), and *Bo Bwa Baing Mye* or *Dama U Gya Mye* (Private Land) (Toe Hla, 2014). *Aya Daw Mye* (Crown ownership of land) was subdivided into four categories namely 1), *Nan Sin Ayar taw Mye* နန်းစဉ်အရာတော်မြေ - (The King was the lead farmer in those lands and the annual planting season was initiated by the King himself, 2), *Sone the Amwe Pyat Ayar taw Mye* စုံသေအမွေပြတ် အရာတော်မြေ-(Land owned by the dead who did not have an inheritor); 3), *Thein su Ayar taw Mye*- သိမ်းစု အရာတော်မြေ- (Land seized by the King from criminals); 4), and *Yun Paung Par Mye*- ယွန်းပေါင်းပါမြေ- (Documented land owned by the Chief Queen). Among the common ownership of land, *Wuttakan Mye* (ဝတ္ထုကမြေ- Religious Land) was also important for the community as they were protected by religious leaders in times of crisis under the name of protecting religion. This land was used to generate income and maintain temples, religious schools, doctrines and the monastery. For the commoner, there was a type of land known as *Dama U Gya Mye* (Private Land), which allowed anyone to own a portion of wasteland that could be used for cultivation. The right to use land in this category was hereditary known as *Bo Bwa Baing* (transferrable as inheritance) to the offspring from the parents. There were three kinds of land; *Lokemyay* (Land to cultivate), *Naymyay* (Land to build their homes), and *Sarmyay* (Land for other purposes for people's livelihood) in *Bo Bwa Baing Mye* (Toe Hla, 2014).

The traditional cultivation practices of Myanmar consisted of wet cultivation (*Le*), dry cultivation (*Ya*), vegetable cultivation on the alluvial lands along the riverbanks where monsoon floods annually took place (*Kaing-Kyun*), and gardening (*U-Yin*). Rice growing fields was called *Le* and according to the documents of the *Konbaung* era, *Le* was more valuable than *Ya* because rice was the most crucial crop for Myanmar society. The crops grown in *Ya* were sesame, millet, cotton, etc. Beans, chili, onions, peas, tomatoes, etc. were grown on land referred to as *Kaing-Kyun,* which was the inundated area along the *Chindwin* and *Ayeyawady* Rivers. Gardening was confined to irrigated areas and inundated tracts. Betel leaf, area nut, plantains, toddy palm, durian, Jackfruit, mangoes, and coconut were grown in the gardens.

Toddy palm cultivation was important in central Myanmar, especially in the *Pakhkku*, *Myinchan*, *Mihttalar*, and *Monywar* districts (Toe Hla, 2004).

During the *Konbaung* period, they were particularly dependent on cultivation in four districts of Upper Myanmar. These four districts were six districts (*Chauk Kha Yaing*) in *Minbu* including *Saku, Salin, Phaunglin*, and *Lekaing*, nine districts (*Koe Kha Yaing*) in *Kyauk Se* consisting of *Pinle, Myitthar, Makkhyar*, in *Mattara* region belonging to *Taung Pyone, Letwe, Letyar, Lamine* and *Shwebo* region. A large amount of rice was produced in these regions, which was also renowned for the granaries of Upper Myanmar at that time. Successive Myanmar monarchs established villages in those areas with prisoners of war and organized them as *Asu* (troops by corps or regiment) and *Amuhtan* (servant) (Toe Hla 2004).

The size of land owned by the King varied from one King to another but some had a more obvious inclination to use land for religious purposes. From the private ownership of land, the King could still benefit. The King was the owner of all the land in his territories, and the tax collected from the farmers amounted to one-tenth of their yearly agricultural production (Ministry of Religious, 2007).

King *Alaung Mintaya,* the founder of the *Konbaung* dynasty who unified most territories of the present Myanmar, tried to improve socio-economic conditions within his realm. While establishing the Third Myanmar Empire with military and political might, he made the socio-economic improvement steady in the early *Konbaung* era and his second son, *Myaydu Min* (1763-76), reaped the fruit of this investment in expansion of agricultural areas. Consequently, *Singu Min* (1776-1782). *Badon Min* (1782-1819) also inherited these favorable conditions and further implemented plans for developing agriculture and international trade (Toe Hla, 2008). Significant improvement in early *Konbaung* era under the above-mentioned monarch included clearing the wasteland, building new water tanks, and repairing the old ones. However, in the late *Konbaung* period, King *Mindon* was the only one outstanding ruler who attempted to improve the economy for the country. Especially under the reign of the powerful and far-sighted King *Mindon*, economic conditions reached sufficiency for local consumption and agriculture was prospering. Moreover, he ordered a reforestation plan and saved the animals by granting land for forest sanctuaries. In those days, he was considered a pious King because saving animals' lives comes from a basic precept to be abided by any disciple of Buddhist teaching. Kings who maintained such religious traditions were highly praised. The agriculture development planning was effective for all subjects and religious traditions. Unfortunately, in the late *Konbaung* era, the agricultural conditions of British Burma greatly changed in Lower Myanmar, which led to the biggest mass migration *Konbaung* Kings experienced since the beginning of the 19th century. *Mindon Min* attempted to improve raw material production and foreign trade, and changed from sufficient agriculture to market-oriented agriculture. However, this attempt to strengthen commercial agriculture did not last long when the whole country fell under British rule after he passed away.

2. The Kings' Effort for Improving Agricultural Infrastructure

The following excerpt from the Royal Orders of different years released by King *Badon* demonstrates the role of the King as both authoritarian owner of land and policy maker.

> Cultivate all available land and grow any suitable crop in order to increase food production (The Royal Orders of Burma, ROB, 21 September 1787).
>
> On irrigation, observe the following five points: 1. Royal Lands have top priority to receive water distributed from reservoirs; 2. Canal used for water distribution should be in good repair at all times; 3. Water is to be shared among various fields strictly in accordance with the quota mentioned in old records; and 4. Works at weirs in Kyaukse area are always given first preference; officers at Kyaukse have the authority to commandeer any man for any emergency (ROB, 15 September 1787); and 5. Enlarge the width of canals so that they carry more water for distribution (ROB, 24 September 1787)."

They could also demand the use of forced collective labor of ordinary citizens and that of prisoners of war to clear wasteland and construct or repair reservoirs, lakes, and irrigation canals. At the same time, they could conscript ordinary citizens to war. The King's order was largely implemented by the head of village tract who was aware of the size of the cultivated area and the number of population in each collection of villages (Toe Hla, 2014). Among the early *Konbaung* monarchs, the policy of *Badon Min* (1783-1819) included recruiting more soldiers by force without disturbing the growing food production and building or repairing of weirs and canals. Noticing the scarcity of cultivators in four of five districts in times of emergency during the war with the Ayutthaya Kingdom, the royal order dated 8 August 1787, demonstrated how the King prioritized food security:

> Either Manipuri or Burmese Royal Land Cultivators shall never be conscripted into the fighting forces; they shall work only in the economic interest of the King (Than Tun, 1986).

The king passed an order addressing the need to repair weirs and canals in nine districts (*Kyauke* Area) as well on 15 September 1787:

> As the damage to the weirs and canals at *Koe Kha Yaing* (*Kyaukse*) in the south, the local economy could be affected. Therefore, queens, princes, and princesses had to appoint *Kyaukse* officers (*Kyaukse-Wun*) and clerks (*Kyaukse-Sayay*) to check maintenance works in this area. Any servants and local cultivators shall participate in repairing weirs and canals under their supervision (Than Tun, 1986).

It can be proven that King *Badon* mainly concentrated on repairing dams and irrigated cultivation in the important cultivation areas. Moreover, *Badon Min* gave special consideration to the social development of cultivators. The royal order dated 21 September 1787 reads:

> Urge the people to grow crops such as corn, beans, and millet on all available lands by repairing the weirs, canals, and water tanks (Than Tun, 1986).

In this order, it stated that all possible kinds of crops had to be cultivated in all arable land to produce consumer food for the people. The royal order dated 22 July 1806 reads:

> *Kyaukse Wun* (*Kyaukse* officer) reminded native cultivators to maintain the ruined weirs and canals at *Min-ye, Kun-se, Tamoke, Myaung-Zone*, and *Zee-taw* in *Makkhaya* Township. If all cultivators including royal servants shirked repairing works in these areas,

> they would not grow in all cultivated lands. Cultivators who participate in the repairing duties shall work cultivation as usual. Supervised *Daing Wun* (Officer of Land Tracts) on maintaining weirs and canals (Than Tun, 1986).

Traditionally, local people were required to participate in the maintenance of water tanks for the Crown, as well. If they refused to work for maintaining canals and weirs, the king punished local farmers by evicting them with force. The royal order dated 10 December 1806 reads;

> *Kyauk-se Wun* (*Kyauk-se* officer) and *Kyauk-se* clerk reported that *Myaung-son* in *Kyauk-se* nine district became shallow and needed to be repaired, so villagers of *Dabet- Hswe, Tet Myaw*, and *Ma-Taung-ta* were called upon to contribute in digging canal. But they refused to do so because this area is situated in the royal compound. According to this report, the king ordered that do not be allowed to live in this area and shall settle available (Than Tun, 1986).

According to this order, the villagers had to repair the canal, which was needed for irrigated cultivation.

Badon Min repaired *Nandarkan* (or) *Maungmakan* on 13 March 1789 and *Mitthilarkan* on 10 April 1798, in addition to building *Kantyikan*, *Tamuatsoekan,* and *Myaungmataw*. He collected revenue inquests to preserve previous irrigation canals and dams such as the *Kintar* Dam, *Nga Naing Thay* Dam, *Nwartat* Dam, *Pyaungpyar* Dam, and *Thintwe* Dam in the nine districts. He also drained the water from the *Samone* River, *Zawgyi* River and *Panlong* River to these canals. Officers and clerks were appointed to preserve these dams, and they urged the villagers to conduct good drainage from the canals. According to the royal order of King *Badon*, villages that avoided working on repairs for drainage were banned from farming (Toe Hla, 2008).

During the late *Konbaung* era, King *Mindon* made a concerted effort to increase rice production. His endeavors extended to improving irrigation. The water from restored irrigation works enabled farmers to bring many acres of agricultural land back under cultivation. In addition to maintaining and building weirs and tanks, embankments and dikes along the *Ayeyarwady* River were constructed to protect the paddy fields from flooding (Myo Myint, 2012).

However, the authoritarian rule of the Kings that ordered constant care for Royal farmland and food security of the soldiers did not minimize the wellbeing of the poor. During King *Mindon's* reign, he passed a royal order that validated the right of land use for the poor people. The Royal order dated 24 March 1853 reads:

> Do not allow the queen, prince, or royal officer and group services to confiscate *Bo Ba Baing Myay, Dama Ucha Myay, Ngwe Paung Myay, U yin Myay*, and *Kaing Kyun Myay* of the poor people who live in any town or village within the whole country. The owner of *Bo Ba Baing Myay*, *Dama Ucha Mya*, and *Ngwe Paung Myay* could cultivate with the king's permission after reporting to the *Hluttaw* (Than Tun, 1989).

The King protected the poor people by promulgating such law and enforcing orders. The King's serious consideration for the poor can be seen in another Royal Order dated 28 June 1854:

> Although land disputes applied by the poor people were accepted, the court did not settle them during the rainy season and suspended them after harvesting paddy. This order was sent to the East Court, West Court, Law Court, township judges, group chiefs, and blood bond brother leaders of the country (Than Tun, 1989).

In a similar manner, the Royal Order dated 24 August 1854, also demonstrated holistic planning for poverty alleviation under his reign.

> The early monarchs of Myanmar embarked on the *Tamoksoe* Lake at the east of the royal city in *Amayara* to supply water for the rice land of the people. As the *Tamoksoe* Lake became a ruin, *Mingyi Mahar Min Hla Min Khaung*, lord of *Myaydu Myo* took charge of repairing it at the auspicious time. In this situation, the expense of the repairing work did not affect the poor people and all the costs must be submitted to the estate for expensing (Than Tun, 1989).

As the rainy season was the time for growing crops, King *Mindon* ordered the Courts to suspend any settlement of land disputes in cases where poor people's lives were at stake. In order to prevent an ongoing case from disturbing the planting season among the poor, he commanded that the respective court postpone jurisdiction until the poor could reap the harvest of the year. The Royal order dated 6 June 1855 reads:

> The rainy season was favorable for cultivating crops, for all the servants and poor people in the various parts of the country. If the court settled land disputes at this time, the cultivation would be affected. Although the East Court, West Court, Law Court, and Officers' Court accepted the appeal of land disputes, the decisions shall wait until the harvest is over (Than Tun, 1989).

In 1856, *Mindon Min* repaired the bunds of the *Aungbinle* and Nanda tanks, and issued money to cultivators to enable them to purchase cattle and seed. In 1862, he repaired the *Shwelong* weir, dug the Nada Canal to the east of Mandalay city, and planted gardens along its banks. King *Mindon* also had the *Tamokso* tank repaired. In 1867, he repaired the tributaries of the *Aungbinle* and *Nanda* tanks, constructed the *Atigauye* tank, and issued money to the peasants for the purchase of cattle and seed (Searle, 1928).

Upper Myanmar had long depended on Lower Myanmar for its rice supply. People in Upper Myanmar relied mainly on the irrigated areas of *Shwebo*, *Kyaukse,* and *Minbu* for rice production. King *Mindo*n made a concentrated effort to increase rice production. His efforts extended to improving irrigation. Irrigation works and water tanks in Upper Myanmar had been neglected in the previous reigns due to administrative chaos, and they needed extensive repairs. The water from restored irrigation works enabled farmers to bring many acres of agricultural land back under cultivation. The inscriptions commemorating the repair of these tanks are still extant, and they contain valuable information on such matters as works of merit by King *Mindon*, the officials who supervised the works, measurements of the tanks, and the acres of land benefited by the repair of each tank. In addition, repairing and building weirs and tanks, embankments, and dikes along the *Ayeyarwaddy* were constructed to protect the paddy fields from flooding. By his order of 1870, King *Mindon* strictly controlled the buying and selling of cattle in his territories. King *Mindon* reduced the kingdom's dependence on Lower Myanmar

for rice. Wheat and chickpeas were ideal crops suitable to the climate and soil of Upper Myanmar, and King *Mindon* did not fail to exploit the production of these crops for commercial purposes. Cotton was another commercial cash crop that provided export earnings to King *Mindon's* treasury. King *Mindon* made cotton an article of royal monopoly from his accession. He also encouraged cultivators to grow two more commercial crops, indigo and cutch. His reign saw extensive exploitation and trade in teak with the outside world (Myo Myint, 2012).

By studying the transformation of the agricultural sector under the *Konbaung* period, it can also be stressed that political centers of the *Konbaung* dynasty pushed very hard to obtain enough water for cultivation. Several kings planned to build reservoirs, dams, drainages, and canals from the pivotal rivers of Myanmar to get ample water to the agriculturalists and ease their worries. There are two renowned monarchs, namely *Badon Min* and *Mindon Min,* who issued many Royal Orders to encourage pro-poor agriculture. Not only did they lead as policy makers in the agricultural sector, they also retained their status as "Farmer King" to ensure the rural people would continue to support them.

Good rain is a necessity for paddy fields, and without rain a good harvest is not possible and surplus would be gone. The King did not ignore the importance of religious rituals but emphasized prayers for rain and organized rites for inviting rain every year. In the days of yore, Myanmar folks performed different kinds of rites to invite rain. For the King, the Ploughing ceremony was one of his rain-invoking rites. In order to prove himself as a virtuous king, his participation in the ploughing ceremony was believed to avert drought, bring reasonable showers, and provide good yield (Khin Maung Nyunt, July 1997).

3. Celebrating Economic and Political Significance of Agriculture by the Kings

According to the tradition of the ancient noble kings who descended from the *Ādicca Vamsa*, the king himself had to perform royal Ploughing ceremonies (*Le Htun Mingala*) surrounded by the royal audience, and royal occasions were conducted on royal land to develop prosperity for the people of his realm. It was believed that a good rain would come and plentiful crops would yield if the king himself participated in Ploughing (Myanmar Encyclopaedia Vol. 12, 1972).

The royal Ploughing ceremony has historical roots as it was celebrated by King *Suddhodana*, father of Prince *Siddhattha,* since Buddha's lifetime. Successive Myanmar Kings usually held royal Ploughing ceremonies at the first waning moon of *Nayun* (the beginning of June). However, not every king performed it and the kings who participated did not hold it every year. Some wise men asserted that celebrating the royal Ploughing ceremony auspiciously predicted good rain and plentiful paddies for the kingdom (Myanmar Encyclopaedia Vol. 12, 1972).

The Ploughing ceremony performed by royalty had economic and political significance for the people of an agricultural country like Myanmar. The Ploughing ceremony was one of the traditional rites to invite rain, which the king himself had to perform should he desire to prove himself a noble king. It was believed that a drought would be averted, reasonable showers would come, and good crops would yield if the Head of State himself participated in Ploughing. Moreover, royal Ploughing created an image of a "Peasant King"(*Taung-thu-gyi-min*) in the

minds of the Myanmar people, who would thus regard the king as one of them, and peasants would be inspired to labor manifold in their works (Khin Maung Nyunt, July 1997).

The Royal family adopted many *Brahmanical* ceremonies that included coronation and other ceremonies like naming the child, hair shampooing, marriage, and the Royal Ploughing Ceremony (*Lay Thwan Mangala*), etc. (Than Tun, 1990). To appease the guardian spirits for a good harvest the king himself had to do the Royal Ploughing Ceremony (*Lay Thwan Mangala*) each year (ROB, 23 Apr 1810).

The Royal Ploughing ceremonies were celebrated by the four kings of the *Konbaung* dynasty (A.D. 1752-1885). Myanmar Chronicles fully recorded these ceremonies. The first king was *Badon Min* (A.D. 1782-1819). The Royal Ploughing Ceremony recorded as follows:

> King *Badon* built a grand royal pavilion near *Aungponle* Lake, to perform a royal Ploughing ceremony on 23 May 1785, (Friday, the first waning moon of *Nayon*). In this ceremony, golden gilt plough and silver gilt plough, golden gilt yoke, and silver gilt yoke, golden and silver gilt trapping and reins, and golden and silver whips were placed in the royal farmland. The king performed royal Ploughing by surrounding the crown prince, ministers, noblemen, wealthy persons, and Brahmins (Maung Maung Tin, 2020).

The second king was King *Bagyidaw* (A.D. 1819-1937). The Royal Ploughing ceremony performed by King *Bagyidaw* was recorded as follows:

> King *Bagyidaw* constructed a great royal pavilion near *Aungpinle* Lake on 26 May 1820 to hold a royal Ploughing ceremony. The king came out together with the chief Queen by surrounding sons, brothers, royal relatives, noblemen, ministers, royal army officers, and men of wealth, and followed and guarded combat arms (consisting of the elephant corps, the cavalry, the chariots, and the infantry). He performed a royal Ploughing ceremony traditionally in the royal farmland (Maung Maung Tin, 2020).

The third king was King *Thayawaddy* (alias King *Shwebo* or King *Konbaung* (A.D. 1837-1846).

The fourth King was King *Mindon* (A.D. 1853-1878). King *Mindon* performed the Royal Ploughing Ceremony three times: on 16 June 1853, 25 June 1866, and 24 June 1868 during the twenty-five years of his reign (Than Tun, 1990) and was recorded as follows

> King *Mindon* came out with royal regalia such as a white umbrella, and long-stemmed fan, and deployed three royal troops in front and three royal troops in back as an entourage on royal Ploughing ceremony dated 16 June 1853. According to the listed persons performed in this ceremony from the crown prince to the royal ministers had to plough in the royal farmland (Maung Maung Tin, 2020).

Two eyewitnesses recorded the royal Ploughing ceremony of King *Mindon*. One was a famous Myanmar artist at the Court named *Saya Chone* whose painting of the Ploughing ceremony is reproduced in this article. The other eyewitness was a British writer-diplomat named Sir George Scott, alias *Shway Yoe,* who wrote details about the 'Gracious Ploughing' in his book, The Burman, his life, and notions (Khin Maung Nyunt, July 1997).

The king himself celebrated the Royal Ploughing Ceremony, which was one of the motivations for *Konbaung* rulers to develop an agriculture plan. The celebration of the royal Ploughing ceremony meant the king himself keenly endeavored in agriculture. The Royal Ploughing Ceremony was held in the *Konbaung* era until 1885. After the British annexation of the whole of Myanmar, the royal Ploughing ceremony was not held except in Cambodia, Thailand, and Laos where it is still traditionally held today.

4. Merit-Making Reflects on the Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation

Asian kings often considered their origins mystical due to cultural beliefs, religious traditions, and the desire to legitimize their authority by linking themselves to divine or supernatural forces.

According to the Myanmar monarchical concepts, the *Konbaung* kings claimed their descent from *Mahāsammata* through *Ukkākarāja* and the *Sakya*. Therefore, it is not surprising that many of the rituals, ceremonies, and concepts at the Burmese Court of the *Konbaung* era were based on Indian ones (Yi Yi, 1982). Among these ceremonies, the Royal Ploughing ceremony was introduced to some Southeast countries from ancient India. In Myanmar, the royal Ploughing ceremony was rooted in Buddhist beliefs, but there were also royal performances to buy people's support and validate his leadership by ordering plentiful harvest for the country. Another area the King showed interest in was environmental conservation.

Preserving the forest has a long history in Myanmar as it is also endowed with impressive flora and fauna. Environmental protection was part of royal duties, which Myanmar kings had faithfully carried out. The ten moral precepts prescribed by Buddha for the attainment of noble qualities were binding upon Myanmar kings. Loving kindness to all beings and providing safety, security, and peace for all living beings in the kingdom was one such precept. At the accession of a new king or the founding of a new capital, works of religious and social merit were carried out. Old religious monuments were repaired and renovated and new ones were built. Old irrigation works were maintained, and new ones were constructed. By royal order, parks and sanctuaries were also created (Khin Maung Nyunt, 2003).

The Royal Orders of the *Konbaung* Dynasty discloses how bird and beast sanctuaries were founded during the reigns of King *Badon*, *Tharawaddy* Min, and *Mindon Min*. Among the *Konbaung* monarchs, *Badon Min* and *Mindon Min* piously supported religion. There were many recorded religious documents during this period.

Badon Min passed five Royal Orders dated 2 March 1788, 13 March 1788, 10 August 1797, 5 July 1801, and 14 August 1807 to create bird and beast sanctuaries during his reign. It can be remarked that these orders were based on religious beliefs. For example, the Royal Order dated 2 March 1788 reads:

> The abbot of the Kun Bo *Araññwāsī* appealed to the king that all the creatures that lived in the Kun Bo area be killed, and to demarcate again the four directions of the Kun Bo area as the sanctuary bird and beast. Therefore, *Badon Min* ordered that no hunters and fishers enter and do anything in the Kun Bo area (Than Tun, 1986).

The Royal Order reveals how King *Badon* deeply concentrated on religious matters and protected the lives of creatures. In the other four Royal Orders, *Badon Min* laid out plans to put up stone pillars to mark bird and beast sanctuaries within religious lands.

King *Thayawaddy* issued sanctuary areas in his order dated 9 August 1838;

> The King had attained as a noble ruler because of the good deeds done in the past had practiced *rājadhamma* (Ten duties of the King), and wanted to accumulate more meritorious by supporting religion, to become nearer a future Buddha. *Taung Tha Man Inn* situated in the south of the Golden City was the sanctuary area marked by the King *Badon*. King *Tharawaddy* ordered to mark sanctuaries by saving or sparing life following places:
>
> *Taung Tha Man Inn*
>
> *Saddan Kan Ma Hnone Inn*
>
> *Yan O Inn*
>
> *Nyaung Ni Bin Inn*
>
> *Saw Ya Kna Inn Tha Ya*
>
> *Bone O Htone Inn,* and
>
> All the places where water level based on reverse rises and subside.
>
> Put up stone pillars to demarcate in eight directions of sanctuary areas, and submit a map of these sanctuaries (Than Tun, 1988).

Mindon Min issued Royal Orders declaring "a vast area of land as a sanctuary for all creatures and beings, which haunt and dwell on land and in the water." There are nine Royal Orders to save and secure wildlife. Among these orders, the Royal Order dated 5 April 1855, is remarkable in demonstrating the need for people to obey the Royal Orders regarding the sanctuary areas.

> East Court arrested and inspected the over sixty boatmen of *Lawka Beik Hman* and *Pyay Son*e because of fishing in *Taung Tha Man* which is marked as a sanctuary area of the successive kings. In this situation, these boatmen admitted their guilt. In this case, *Nga Shwe Ya*, Helmsman of *Lawka Beik Hman,* and *Nga Shwe Min*, Helmsman of *Pyay Sone* were executed after beating a gong for their weak control of their follower boatmen. These boatmen were punished by giving lashes for fishing in the sanctuary area (Than Tun, 1989).

It can be remarked that kings more severely punished the responsible person than the guilty person in times of disobedience to Royal Orders. The far-sighted kings of the *Konbaung* dynasty ruled with the ten precepts incumbent on a king and kinds upon their citizens. By studying the Royal Orders concerning bird and beast sanctuaries, it is evident that *Konbaung* monarchs generally believed in religion. By declaring sanctuary areas, they wanted to offer good merits by saving and sparing all the creatures. However, if the people did not obey the orders, the king would punish them severely. It can be suggested that protection for biodiversity

led the noble king to keep religious traditions and impacted the consolidation of political legitimacy through this merit-making.

Conclusion

The development of the socio-economic life of the people during the monarchical system depended on the success of the King in carrying out his royal duties to improve the citizens' wellbeing. Monarchs of the early *Konbaung* era were more eagerly involved in politics, which was mostly war making than economic development. However, *Badon Min* and *Mindon Min* were notable supporters of religious influence in society and worked towards the reconstruction of a kingdom based on the Buddhist concept.

Such a religious influence is strongly seen in their policy making of agricultural and environmental conservation plans. Under the reign of several kings of *Konbaung*, food security was prioritized while the needs of the poor were neglected. However, being an authoritarian governing system under the absolute monarchy, people were also forced to contribute both tax and labor to the King. Their efforts of agricultural expansion aiming at promoting the commercial sector might have lifted the social status of some cultivators but not all faced the same fate. In general, the *Konbaung* monarchs' support for irrigation systems, loans, labor, and other necessities were obviously not adequate for the growing population and battling soldiers of his own forces. When the global agricultural transformation happened, local cultivators faced many difficulties due to both man-made and natural disasters. Additionally, cultivators could not avoid paying taxes after every harvest. These conditions often led to increasing numbers of loans against agricultural land and widespread impoverishment among the cultivators.

In Upper Myanmar, the traditional cultivation system gradually transitioned to commercial agriculture under King *Badon's* rule, reaching its peak during the reigns of *Mindon* and *Thibaw*. However, the centralization of commercial cash crops and trade as a royal monopoly meant that cultivators did not benefit due to exploitation by the king's purchasers. Once the *Ayeyarwaddy* Delta under British Burma became the rice bowl of Myanmar, making the country a major rice exporter in Asia after the opening of the Suez Canal, downstream mass migration started to happen under King *Mindon.* Eventually, the King's effort to provide sufficient local consumption was obstructed due to labor shortages in upper Myanmar.

However, this paper suggests that not all *Konbaung* Kings were war mongers. They also tried hard to perform the traditional duties of a king for agricultural improvement and sustainability as outlined by text in many of the Royal Orders. However, their actions seem far from adequate, as none of them were known for improving the status of the country's economy in an outstanding manner.

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Ethnicity, Territory and Belonging Amidst a Crisis in the Burma-India Borderlands: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

In recent political history in the Chin state of Burma, Manipur and Mizoram states in Northeast India have also shared experiences of colonization, conflict, and climate change in the India-Burma border. This paper studies the Chin people, better known as Chin-Kuki-Mizo in colonial vernacular, who are today predominantly found at the India-Burma border. The main purpose of this study is to investigate connected histories, territory, free movement regime (FMR), conflict, and displacement that has overwhelmed the India-Burma borderland. I have chosen this topic because after the ethnic conflict in Manipur state of India between Kuki and Meitei communities, the central government of India suspended FMR, giving rise to issues regarding fencing the Indo-Burma border on 6 February 2024. However, the Mizoram and Nagaland states opposed the Center's decision to fence the Indian-Burma border and scrap FMR with the neighbouring country. This research relies on personal observation and secondary data. The author used qualitative research approaches with case studies on the Chin tribes in the India-Burma border. The objective of this study is to understand ethnicity, territory, and belonging amidst conflict in the Chin state of Burma and how those elements impacted the Manipur crisis in India. The research questions are: Why did the central government of India want to suspend FMR and try to fence the India-Burma border? How will the abolishment of FMR and fencing of India-Burma border affect the Chin tribes in their everyday life, including displacement at the India-Burma border?

Keywords: Chin, Conflict, Displaced Persons, Border Issues, Free Movement Regime

Introduction

Today, the Chins are divided into three countries like Burma, India and Bangladesh. They are traditionally called the Chin-Kuki-Mizo. The author applied the word Chin into three countries, Chin in Burma, Mizo in Mizoram, and Kuki in Bangladesh and Manipur state and other Northeast India. This paper is limited to a study among the Chin people who inhabit in the India-Burma border. It is one of the less developed states in their own respective countries. On 1 February 2021, civil war ignited on the India-Burma borderlands, due to the miliary coup in Burma. On 3 May 2023, the ethnic conflict in Manipur state of Northeast India began between the Kuki and Meitei communities. To put current social and political issues into perspective, it will be helpful to explore the historical context of colonial rule and record and postcolonial states attempt to control movement of hill peoples in the India-Burma border, a people who are

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often ignored in everyday politics and notions of ethnic identity. Historically, the India-Burma borderland has seen continual movement and a flow of people in their everyday life. However, recent ethnic conflict in the Manipur state between Kuki and Meitei communities caused the central government of India to scrap FMR and try to fence the India-Burma border. Thus, both Nagaland and Mizoram are against the Center's decision but Chief Minister N Biren Singh, Meitei himself welcomes the Center's decision.

Introduction of Chin-Kuki-Mizo

The India-Burma border have faced destabilizing and destructive conflicts throughout history. In such context, when it involves an ethnic and political conflict it is very important to study the Chin-Kuki-Mizo family, who are living in the India-Burma borderlands. The Chin have been independently living in the present India-Burma borderlands before the British rule and postcolonial times. They have possessed a distinct identity before India and Burma formed into a nation. However, the Chin people were split into three nations by the British, namely Bangladesh, India, and Burma. The Chin leaders of Burma signed the Panglong Treaty with other ethnic nationalities at Panglong, present-day Shan State, in 1947 in order to obtain independence for Burma from the British. Currently existing states in the India-Burma area are Chin and Mizoram. They have permeable international borders and historical linkages to Bangladesh, India, and Burma in border areas. One of the main access points into Northeast India from Southeast Asia is the border between India and Burma (Lalmalsawma et al., 2023, p. 2).

Mizoram and Chin States are small and ethnically distinct sub-states, which have considerably more in common with each other than with their respective 'parents' nations of India and Burma. The Mizo say Indian as "*Vai*" and the Chin say Burmese (Bamar) as "*Kawl.*" The terms "*Vai*" and "*Kawl*" mean outsider/backward people or foreigners. They have strong historical, cultural, and ethnic connections. Historically, the Mizo could not be without Chin and Chin could not be without Mizo. J. Shakespeare rightly said that "The Kukis, Lushais (now Mizos) and Chins are the same race" (Shakespeare, 2008). They are a powerful and independent people. T.H. Lewin also writes that they speak one language and have the same customs. They are known to the Bengali as Kookies (Kuki) and to the Burmese as Chin (Lakher) (Lewin, 1869). Apart from the Chin Hills, they also spread over the Hkamti, Somra Tact and Kale-Kabaw-Myittha plain in Upper Burma. Their kindred tribes, namely Kuki and Mizo in colonial parlance, are also largely found in the Northeast states of Mizoram, Tripura, Assam, Manipur and in the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, where they are known by several tribal and sub-tribal appellations (Pau 2022, p.14).

The India-Burma borderlands have been too often seen only from the perspective of the colonial and postcolonial states, which saw the border as the "outer land limits." The people living near the border between India and Burma are more similar to each other and the Southeast region than they are to their counterparts on the Indian and Burmese mainland. Colonial and postcolonial borders have had significant impact on the relationships between members of the same ethnic community in the borderlands. Examining the interconnected history of people, culture, and religion in the borderlands is the aim of this study (Pau, 2018,

p.2). The Chin Hills (now Chin state) was annexed and put under control by the British in 1895. The annexation of the Chin came after series of cruel military expeditions and harsh disarmament policy adopted by the British. The Chin Hills Regulation of 1896, which recognized traditional chieftainship, established "indirect rule" in the Chin Hills during British rule (Pau, 2022). Despite having the same ancestry and history, the people currently known as Chin in Burma, Mizo in Mizoram, Kuki in Manipur and other Northeast India, and Kuki-Chin in the Chittagong Hill Tract of Bangladesh were split into several administrative entities under British colonial authority and postcolonial states. Since then, cross-border movement has been commonplace in their daily lives and communities.

India-Burma Borderlands

Borders, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands are human creations and are historically constructed spatial entities (Pau, 2018, p.3). Border studies have demonstrated the relationship between colonial rule and border making. The colonial state's enforced administrative framework denotes a unique kind of governance. The history of colonialism is inextricably linked to the creation of India-Burma, especially in the hilly areas of both countries. Throughout the colonial era, persistent efforts were undertaken to define and redraw boundaries. Colonial impressions were left on the Chins during this time, as seen by the boundary-drawing and demarcation that led to the creation of the Lushai Hills and Chin Hills (Puia, 2022, p.5).

Large paths of highland country between India and Burma remained outside the scope of imperial surveys and colonial requests after the British took control of Assam in 1826 and upper Burma in 1886. The native communities positioned themselves between the British Empire's Calcutta and Rangoon, and the so-called Chin tribes were among the final rebel groups to fall under British domination. Owing to language similarities and close proximity, their territory was referred to as the "Chin-Lushai country," while the inhabitants were referred to as either the Lushai-Kuki tribe or "Chin-Kuki." Major military operations to the connecting hill tracts between the Lushai Hills, the Chin Hills, and the southern hills of Manipur were always planned in order to leave the strongest lasting effects of British dominance on the local societies. The culmination of these military actions was the Chin-Lushai Expedition of 1889–1890, which introduced colonialism to the Lushai people for good (Vumlallian, 2010, p.58). The boundary between the Chin and Lushai Hills was established in 1901, with some minor modifications made under colonial control in 1921 and 1922, respectively. The "traditional" border between India and Burma was confirmed as the international border by the boundary treaty they signed on March 10, 1967 in Rangoon. At the macro-locality level, the international border therefore produced difference or "otherness" (Pau, 2018, p. 9). "This agreement was largely based upon boundaries established by the British over the period of colonial rule, as can be seen in the Treaty of Yandaboo (1826), the Manipur-Chin Hills boundary (1894), and the Chin-Lushai Hills (1921). The colonial rulers dubbed the communities along the modern India-Burma border the Chin-Kuki and Lushai, and occasionally they were collectively referred to as the Chin. The boundaries of these ethnic groups were strengthened and defined by colonial administrative borders. As a result, the term "Chin" was adopted by the inhabitants of the Chin Hills, Sagaing, Magwe, and tiny communities in Rakhine State, Burma. The people

of Mizoram, Manipur state, Tripura, Assam, and surrounding areas, including the Chittagong Hill Tracts in modern-day Bangladesh, were referred to as Kuki and Mizo" (Puia, 2020, p. 77).

Prior to colonial times, the Chin Hills remained under the direct administration of the Chief Commissioner of Burma. Bertram S. Carey and Captain Rose were appointed as Political Officers. The Lushai Hills (now Mizoram) also divided into two areas. The southern Lushai Hills was placed under Bengal on 1 April 1891, and the Northern Lushai Hills was placed under Assam on June 3, 1890. Captain Herbert Browne was the Chief Commissioner of Assam and exercised general control over all departments with headquarter at Aizawl (Lalthlengliana, 2007, p. 38-39). The British administrative controlled these hills with three different authorities, in the north by Assam (now Mizoram), to the south by Bengal (Bangladesh) and the east (the Chin Hill) by the British Burma. From the beginning, it was desirable for the whole Chinland/Zoland known as "the whole Chin-Lushai" country to be under one authority. Furthermore, a conference was thus convened at Calcutta on 25 January 1892, known as the Chin-Lushai Conference, "to discuss civil and military affairs connected with the control of the Lushai and Chin Hills." The conference discussed for four days various aspects of the future administration, military control, and the Chin-Lushai country (Lalthlengliana, 2007, p.132-133). The Conference desired to bring the Chin-Lushai under one administration (Puan, 2022, p. 151), but unfortunately, this did not happened until today. However, the Chin people from Burma, India and Bangladesh continue to aspire for the reunification as one nation in the future.

In 1937, the political movement in Burma broke away from British India, dividing the Chinland into two nations: Burma and India. When both India and Burma gained independence, the British government was unable to bring the two portions of the Chin territory back together. Between the areas, they drew an international border. Since then, the territories of the Chin people have remained divided; some now reside in India, while others do so in Burma (Zomi Community USA, 2023, p. 5). The first blow to the Chins' national awareness came with the Chin Hills' independence from the Indian Union. The Chins of the Chin Hills, however, lacked the political maturity to object to this. Additionally, Chin Hills did not have a political party at the time to express their objections. Burma's separation from other regions frequently had an impact on the sociopolitical evolution of the Chin people (Chatterjee, no date, p. 24). When the Burma Act of 1935 separated Burma from British India, the British divided Chin country into two regions without consulting the people who lived there. British Burma assumed control of the eastern portion of Chin country, while British India continued to administer the western portion. Without consulting the people, the western portion of Chin land was partitioned once more after India and Pakistan gained independence from British India in 1947. A portion was annexed by India, while the remaining portion became part of east Pakistan (now Bangladesh) (Bawhrin, 2002, p.9).

Colonial policies imposed boundaries, split up land, isolated communities, and declared sovereign power. Tribal communities had no frontiers or bounds prior to the imposition of colonial power. These borders and policies were upheld by postcolonial states at the end of colonial control, upholding "imperial forms of territoriality" (Puia 2021, p.415). However, because of the various state policies of the participating nations, the border impacted the sense of belonging in diverse ways. While Chin is the officially recognized name in Burma, Mizo is

the official identity of Mizoram, India. Moreover, cross-border migrations were still permitted, and there were instances in which social links between ethnic groups were reinforced via marriage, trade, and other daily interactions (Puia, 2020, p. 78).

Rise of Nationalism

The Anglo-Kuki War of 1917–1919 was waged in opposition to British expansionist imperialism and resulted in the subjugation of the Kuki Hills. Before colonial rulers came, Kukis lived rather independently. With no outside help or state to manage them, each village managed its own affairs and was politically and economically independent. (Kipgen and Haokip, 2021, p.1) Political and non-political organizations started to emerge in the late 1920s, coinciding with the growth of nationalism. The first Chin political organization in the Chin Hills was the Chin Hills Union Organization (CHUO), which was established in Mindat in 1928. Likewise, the Young Lushai Association, established in 1935, emerged as "the pioneer body to rouse the political consciousness among educated Mizo" in the Lushai Hills. The 1946 formation of the Lushai Union (later Mizo Union) resulted in a split among its members; one group wanted the Lushai Hills to become part of Burma after its independence, while the other group wanted to stay in India for ten years before deciding on its future status (Pau, 2018, p. 14). The United Mizo Freedom Organization (UMFO) was established as a political organization on July 5, 1947. All Mizo people, including the Kuki-Chin in Bangladesh and the Chin in Burma, were to be united under one goal. The UMFO's members believed that Chins in Burma and Lushais in British India belonged to the same racial stock and that they should be under Burma (Lalshmi, 2010, p. 185). Despite the fact they were living in separate nations, they had a common goal to one day unite as a single country and help one another out when necessary. In 1947, India gained its independence, and the Mizo Union renamed itself as the Young Mizo Association (YMA). It developed into the most influential and long-lasting social network in Mizoram. UMFO promoted a single "Zoram" (Zo Nation) to be made up of these three nations (Joy & Schendel, 2015, p. 248). Today, YMA plays a very significant role in Mizo society.

Following their independence in 1947 from India, 1948 from Burma, and 1971 from Bangladesh, the Chin people have faced discrimination in their various nations. Mainland Indians have referred to the Mizo as sub-nationalism in India. Mainland India has not just oppressed Mizoram but the entire Northeastern regions. The Mizoram people continually live in terror of being assimilated (Lakshmi, 2010, p. 185). Under military control and the central government led by the majority Bamar, the Chin people of Burma continued to face the greatest persecution and discrimination. There was armed conflict shortly after Burma's independence. By the 1960s, a burgeoning movement in the Chin state was being fanned by the suppression of federalist Chin leaders. Ethnic leaders of the Chin people in Mizoram, India, founded the Chin National Front (CNF) in March 1988 with the goal of "restoring democracy and federalism in the Union of Burma" as well as the Chin people's right to self-determination. In response to the CNF, however, the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) further militarized Chin state, forcing thousands of Chin people to flee across the border into Mizoram (Physicians for Human Rights, 2011, p. 15).

A famine in 1959 brought on by the bamboo's blossoming badly impacted the Mizoram people. Allegations that the Indian government did not act appropriately in response to food shortages gave rise to an underground statehood movement in Mizoram. The armed conflict between the Mizo National Front (MNF) and the Indian government in Mizoram lasted for almost 20 years. For the first time in its history, the Indian armed forces responded with airstrikes, bombing its own people. Many Mizo fled to Bangladesh and Burma. In Burma, there were still a lot of Mizo people, particularly in Tahan of Kalay, which is near the Chin Hills in the Sagaing region. A few MNF activists and insurgents sought safety in the Chin state during this period. As the need for inexpensive labor in Mizoram grew in the 1970s, a growing number of Chins from Burma travelled there. Due to their similar ethnicity, the Chin at this time had very few issues and easily assimilated into Mizo society. A deal that promised Mizoram would become a separate state under the Indian federal system brought an end to the dispute between MNF and the Indian government in 1986. Mizoram became a state officially on February 20, 1987. Tension between the populace of Burma and the reigning military government was sharply building during this period, and an uprising happened in 1988 in Burma. Many Chins crossed the border to seek shelter in the state of Mizoram due to rising human rights abuses and conflict in Burma (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 16, Emily, 2023).

In addition, the Kuki from Manipur and the Chin from Burma were involved in a Mizo movement that aimed to establish Greater Mizoram (Haokip, 2023, p. 9). Before the MNF signed a peace accord with the central government of India and Mizoram state was formed in northeast India, Tial Khal, the founder of the CNF, was active in the MNF, an armed resistance group that fought mostly against the Indian government. The Indian government had provided monetary support from Mizoram residents to CNF. Students from the 1988 uprising attended protests alongside other young Chin people. Among them was an organization known as the Burmese Democratic Front (BDF), which was living in a camp for refugees close to Champhai, Mizoram, and was supported by the Indian government (Peter, 2013, p. 57-58).

Displacement Issues

The Chin people moved to the Mizoram state in India, which shared a border with the western Burmese state of Chin State. The Chin people have systematically been mistreated by the dictatorship for a long time. Following the coup in 2021, citizens throughout the state adjusted by demonstrating peacefully; nevertheless, the military violently attacked, detained, tortured, and murdered peaceful protestors. With the junta's ruthless killing, torturing, imprisonment, and other abuses of civilians, many young people took up arms in order to protect themselves and others from its attacks (Damian, 2021, pp. 1-2). Chin migration to Mizoram began in the mid-1980s and increased in the early 2000s with the combination of worsening political conditions in Burma and famine in the Chin state. Prior to the 2021 coup, all nine townships in the Chin state came together to form the Chinland Defense Force (CDF) on 4 April 2021 and joined CNF to resist the junta. Thus, junta forces indiscriminately attacked civilians in the Chin state, significantly causing human death and burning of homes. Furthermore, the Chin people crossed the international border for safety. Armed conflicts had a significant human cost in the Chin state of Burma. As a result, over 60,000 Chin people fled to the Indian border. The worst affected areas such as Mindat and Thantlang township faced largescale shelling and arson

attacks from the military regime. In Thantlang, the military torched 1,277 houses, including 12 churches and religious buildings, forcing most of the population of the town to flee in October 2021 (Sang, 2023, p. 13). As many forced displacement situations persisted for protracted periods of time, the proportion of older people in these populations increased. However, the resources and attention of the central government in India and international community was insufficient for the needs and perspectives of Chin people in humanitarian emergencies and neglected the India-Burma borderlands. In parallel, scholarly attention on refugees and forced displacement populations on the India border has relatively been neglected.

India supported pro-democracy parties during the 1988 uprising by giving them material support, establishing camps for refugees in Manipur and Mizoram, and strongly denouncing the junta. Following the coup in 2021, India has stayed silent about the Burmese problem and is interacting with the junta in hopes that it will continue to assist in containing rebels operating along the border (Sreeparna, 2023). Authorities in the Indian border state of Manipur have reportedly started gathering biometric information from thousands of Burmese residents who escaped fighting between armed ethnic groups and the Burmese military, according to an RFA report. Since the end of July 2023, the Indian government has begun gathering biometric data (RFA Burmese, 2023).

As of 2023, India is hosting over 74,600 refugees from Burma, more than an estimated 54,100 of whom arrived since the 2021 coup. Over 40,000 refugees from Burma were living in Mizoram and 8,250 were living in the Manipur state (OCHA, 2023). The Mizo community collective provided support to the Chin refugees as a brotherhood tied by humanity and ethnicity. Many camps set up across the different districts of Mizoram, claiming the same ancestry as the Zo tribe. They were divided by the British rule and as a result were given different names, even postcolonial times. The ethnic ties are strong despite the government of India directing the Mizoram state to send them back to their abusive military government. Although the state government of Mizoram, civil society, and NGOs took the burden of hosting their Chin brothers and sisters from across the border, there was a lack of support from the central government of India, the international community, and agencies. The Chin displaced people needed support and sustainable solutions, and the Chin and Mizo communities both faced pain and agony. On an urgent basis, food, clothing, safe shelter, drinking water and sanitation and women's dignity kits were all needed, as many of the displaced continued to live in camps built by communities with grass roofs and bamboo and plastic walls (Rini, 2023).

Manipur Issues

The State of Manipur is made up of a diverse people. There are two well differentiated groups of people: the hill (Naga-Kuki) and valley (Meitei). They are differentiated not only socially but even territorially. The non-tribal (Meitei) group of the state embraced Hinduism, while a large majority of the tribal (Naga-Kuki) groups embraced Christianity. The Meiteis of the valley sit close to the seat of power at Imphal and enjoy the benefits of royal patronage while exploiting the rich land resources of the valley reveled in their cultural heritage with the dance, drama, music and the worship of Hindu deity (Dikshit & Jutta, 2014, p. 320). The three largest groups are the Nagas (24%), Kuki-Chin (16%) and Meitei (53%). Currently, the Nagas and

Kukis are recognized as "Scheduled Tribes" (ST) under the Indian constitution, recognizing their disadvantaged socio-economic status. However, the Meitei are not recognized as ST. The conflict between the Kuki and Meitei communities started on 3 May 2023 when the All-Tribal Student Union Manipur (ATSUM) called to protest a Manipur High Court order, which sought the recommendation of ST status for the Meitei community. The Kuki-Naga community in Manipur feared that granting ST status to the Meiteis would lead to the loss of job opportunities and allow the Meiteis to acquire land in the hills, pushing the Indigenous Peoples out of their traditional homelands (Singe, 2023). In Manipur, the Meitei occupied 10% of the land and hill tribes occupied 90% of the land (Rinku, 2023).

After six months of violence, as of 7 November 2023 the ethnic conflict between the Kuki and Meiteis communities in the Manipur state reported a total death of 180 (Surinder, 2023). On 19 July 2023, a horrific video surfaced of two Kuki women being paraded naked on a road by a group of Meitei men in Manipur on 4 May 2023, which shook the country (Signe, 2023). Many India media and state controlled media (controlled by Meitei groups) stated that one of the key issues in the ongoing conflict in Manipur is the migration of the Kuki-Chin peoples into India from Burma, due to the 2021 coup. The Meiteis have accused these migrants and the suspected "narco-terror network" along the Indo-Burma border of fomenting trouble in the state. The Kukis have blamed the Meiteis and the Chief Minister N Biren Singh, a Meitei himself, used this as pretext for "ethnic cleansing" (Deeptiman, 2023). The separation is even more evident by seeing that the ethnic cleansing operation is complete with the valley having been cleansed of the Kukis and the hills being cleansed of the Meiteis, including government officials and members of the Legislative Assembly (Signe, 2023).

The violence has affected all communities in the state. Around 200 people have been killed and more than 70,000 people have been displaced, including at least 10,000 children. There are more than 4,694 civilian properties that have been destroyed. The capital, Imphal, has been cleansed of the Kukis, and the second largest town of Churchandpur has been cleansed of the Meitei. Approximately 5,600 weapons and 650,000 rounds of ammunition went missing from the State Armories. Both Kuki and Meitei communities have been armed to the teeth with weapons from various insurgent groups (Signe, 2023). Manipur Chief minister N. Biren Singh said that the state has requested the Centre to permanently freeze the FMR between India and Burma that allows people residing near the international border to travel 16 km into each other's territories without any document (The Times of India, 2023).

Free Movement Regime Issues

The India-Burma border is unfenced, and individuals on both sides have familial and ethnic connections leading to the establishment of the FMR in the 1970s. The 1,643 km long Indo-Burma border, which passes through Mizoram, Manipur, Nagaland and Arunachal Pradesh, currently has FMR and is guarded by Assam Rifles. It was implemented in 2018 as part of India's Act East policy, an effort to boost the region's economy by boosting India's trade with Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) and other Asian nations. It is a regime that has allowed tribes on both sides to travel without any visa restrictions, maintain their age-old ties, and engage in barter trade. People coming from Burma particularly look for employment

opportunities in India, as well as better education facilities. With many of the hill tribes sharing ethnicities, it is also a regime that has kept their cultural connections alive (Neeraj, 2024).

The ethnic conflict in Manipur between Kuki and Meitei community in Northeast India, resulted in the Indian central government abolishing the FMR along the Burma border on 2 January 2024 (Neeraj, 2024). Within the FMR framework, every member of hill tribes, whether a citizen of India or Burma could cross over by presenting a border pass with a one-year validity. The government deployed military forces, causing an "exchange of populations" between communities. The displaced seeking refuge in relief camps and neighboring states raised concerns of a potential civil war (Shashank, 2024). The Center is in talks with Burma authorities to end the free movement of people and goods on the porous 1,643 km-long India-Burma border. The FMR is started in Manipur state of India-Burma border by the central government India, and it is try to complete within four and half years (Namrata, 2024). This will affect both sides of the local people, especially the Chin people in their own land in their everyday life.

Local People Opposed Center Abolish of FMR and Border Fencing

Right after the Center announced to abolish FMR and install a border fence, the Zo Reunification Organization (ZORO) and local NGOs in Mizoram strongly opposed the idea that would divide the Zofate (Zo people) residing on both sides. ZORO urged the Government of India to reconsider its decision to terminate the connections of the Zo people living on the international border areas of India and Burma. Zo unification meant bringing all ethnic communities, Mizos of Mizoram, Kuki of Manipur, Chins of Burma and Bangladesh, under one administrative umbrella. The hilly area of Manipur adjoining Mizoram is inhabited by the Zo community who share the same culture, religion, tradition and ancestry. Following ethnic conflict violence in Manipur, over 13,000 people from the Kuki community in Manipur have taken shelter in Mizoram. The majority of those who reached Mizoram belonged to the Chin community from Burma, who share ancestry, ethnicity, and culture with the Mizos of Mizoram (Bikash, 2024).

The Mizoram Assembly on 28 February 2024 adopted a resolution opposing the Center's decision to fence the Indian-Burma border and scrap the FMR with its neighboring country. The resolution, moved by Home Minister K Sapdanga, urged the Center to reconsider its decision. It urged the Union government to instead take steps to ensure the Zo ethnic people, "who have been divided in different countries, are unified under one administrative unit." While moving the resolution, Sapdanga said the Zo ethnic people, who have inhabited Mizoram and the Chin Hills of Burma for centuries and once lived together under their own administration, have been geographically divided when the British occupied the region. "The Zo ethnic people cannot accept the India-Burma border, which has been imposed on them by the British. They have been dreaming of reunification under one administrative unit someday" (The Times of India, 2024). The Mizo people held demonstrations, and a few months later, on 1 March 2024, the Nagaland Legislative Assembly (NLA) passed a resolution against scrapping the FMR and fencing the India-Burma border areas (Nagaland Post, 2024)

The resolution was against the Center's decision to fence the border and end the over seven-decade old bilateral FMR between the two countries (Times of India, 2024). The Nagaland assembly state requested the Center The Nagaland assembly state it would request the Center "to reconsider its decision and abandon plans of suspending the FMR and fencing along the Indo-Burma border." The resolution says that "these measures will seriously disrupt the age-old historical, social, tribal and economic ties of the Naga people living on both sides of the international border" (Times of India, 2024). On the other hand, Manipur Chief Minister N Biren Singh welcomed the Center's decision. Manipur, in his budget speech on 28 February 2024, stated that "from major policy decisions like the discontinuation of the FMR, border fencing to improving the infrastructure and equipment of our security forces, we have left no stone unturned to ensure our state's security" (The Times of India, 2024). There will be social and political impacts on the Chin people in the borderland regarding their ethnicity, border issues, political, conflict, displacement and everyday life.

Crisis Become Political Unity

The political crisis has witnessed a surge of political unification among the Chin people in the borderland. They are assisting and understanding each other more than before, supported by strong solidarity and humanitarian response from the people of Mizoram. The response of the central government and the local people bear significance in creating understanding of Mizo's perception of border and belonging.

The Government of India issued a directive to seal the borders and send refugees back by tightening the border control. The Government of Mizoram has opened its borders and doors to the people fleeing the violence. In his letter to the Prime Minister of India, Pu Zoramthanga, the former Chief Minister of Mizoram, notes that deportation of the refugees is not acceptable to Mizoram (Puia, 2022, p. 12).

On 16 March 2021, a Mizo member of parliament requested that the Ministry of Home Affairs change its policy on refugees, stating the people of Mizoram would not accept the deportation of refugees "until the restoration of peace and normalcy in Burma" reasoning that "they are our brothers," and "sending them back would mean killing them" (June, 2023, p. 12). Since July 2023, the Indian government has been collecting biometric data from Burmese refugees in the Indian border region, especially in Manipur. Refugees from Burma are required to record their fingerprints, eyes, face and voice (RFA, 2023). Mizoram state and district political officials from multiple parties are supportive of the refugees from Burma. The Mizo National Front (MNF), Zoramthanga, had urged the Central Government to treat people fleeing from Burma as refugees and not as undocumented aliens. Currently, the Mizoram government allows Chin and other refugee children in India to be enrolled in school (Chin Association of Maryland, 2023, p. 12).

The Chin-Mizo has often been tied to identity discourses and the assertion of a pan-ethnic identity, which emphasizes the shared cultural origins of the two communities. Pan-ethnic identities have been asserted under various labels such as Chin-Kuki-Mizo (as Zo). The most influential pan-identity movement in Mizoram is Zo, which includes residents of Mizoram, Chin state, and Sagaing region in Burma; Assam, Manipur and Tripura in India; and the

Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. Mizo and Chin identity discourses reject identification as Indian or Burmese, and the Chin and Mizo identities are both defined in distinction from their states of citizenship, India and Burma (McConnachie, n.d., p. 6). The Indian government's stance on its border and national security for its citizens, therefore, leads to reluctance to accept Burmese refugees in their own land. The perspective of the Mizo, including the state government, shows the idea of identity and belonging, as the Chin-Mizo share a blood relation. The Chin-Kuki-Mizo have long aspired reunification and live under one administration as Zoram (Zo nation) (Puia, 2022, p. 13).

The MNF movement and the leaders of Mizo demanded independence from the central government of India for the Mizo inhabited areas, including Chin Hills. However, later this led to granting of statehood of Mizoram in 1986 by the central government of India (Puia, 2022, p. 14).

After the ethnic conflict in Minapur, on 5 May 2023, the 10 Kuki MLAs in Manipur state submitted a representation to the Hon'ble Home Minister of India with the demand for separate administration, expressing a strong desire to create a Kukiland or Zo country, comprising parts of India, Burma and Bangladesh (Rinku, 2023). Current Mizoram Chief Minister Lalduhoma recently met Prime Minister Narendra Modi and External Affairs Minister Dr. S. Jaishankar where Burmese refugees are residing in Mizoram. The Chief Minister also expressed his wish for a Greater Mizoram as part of Akhand Bharat. Lalduhoma further stated people on both sides of the border share the desire is to come under one administration, and that the refugees seeking shelter inside Mizoram are not treated differently but as brothers and sisters (Bikash, 2024). It is time for the Center government to understand the importance of engaging with border people and supporting them.

Conclusion

The India-Burma border was created by humans, especially during colonial times. It has continued to be used in post-colonial times without consulting the inhabitants of the border regions. They are divided into separate administrations, laws and orders of different countries but they don't see each other as strangers due to their shared blood tied. Ethnic territorial movements started within a decade after independence of India and Burma from colonial rule (and some even before). Cross-border movement in the India-Bangladesh and the India-Burma borderlands were common in the everyday lives of the communities.

They were not only movement of insurgent groups and their support, but also of the common people who were forced to flee violence perpetrated by either the Indian army/Burmese Army or armed resistance groups. During the height of the Mizo movement in the then Lushai/Mizo Hills people from this hill flee to others neighboring hills to escape torture and violence by the Indian army forces and at the same time Chin people flee to other sides to escape torture and violence from Burmese army forces where their ethnic tribes are largely resides in border regions (Haokip, 2023, p. 2). Indian and Burmese authorities have discriminated its own citizens especially minority groups including Chin-Kuki-Mizo. In reality, India most of Northeast India are isolated by the mainland India because they are historically, physically, and culturally different from mainland India. At the same time in Burma majority of Bamar

and military have controlled the country and discriminated the Chin and non-Bamar nationalities.

The cross-border movement in these regions was not limited to insurgent groups and their supporters but also included ordinary people forced to flee violence inflicted by either the Indian or Burmese armies, as well as armed resistance groups. During the peak of the Mizo movement in the then Lushai/Mizo Hills, residents fled to neighboring hills to escape torture and violence by Indian army forces, while Chin people crossed to other areas to avoid persecution by Burmese army forces. These ethnic communities, largely residing in the border regions, faced severe repression (Haokip, 2023, p. 2). Both Indian and Burmese authorities have discriminated against their own citizens, particularly minority groups such as the Chin-Kuki-Mizo. In practice, much of Northeast India remains isolated from mainland India due to historical, geographical, and cultural differences. Similarly, in Burma, the majority Bamar population and the military have dominated the country, marginalizing Chin and other non-Bamar ethnic groups.

However, Mizoram stand out as a peaceful and developed state, unlike the Chin in Burma, Chin-Kuki in Bangladesh and Kuki in Manipur who remain less developed and isolated in their respective places. This is one of the reasons why conflict and migration from Chin state, Manipur, and Bangladesh to Mizoram persist until today. Historically, the Mizos are youngest among the ethnic family, but their action and responsibilities resemble those of an elder. Today, the Mizo language is widely used by Chin-Kuki-Mizo in Mizoram and other part of Northeast India, the Chin Hills of Burma, and the Chittagong Hill tracts of Bangladesh as a medium of communication among themselves and with the Mizos. This shows that they share growing awareness of political crisis and a sense of unity and support as brother and sisters. In Chin State, language is a significant problem; because of political unrest in the state, many fled to Mizoram, where they learn Mizo language. In the future, the Mizo language is likely to be used as a common language by the entire Chin-Kuki-Mizo family, promoting more unity and deeper understanding among the Chin groups.

The abolishment of the FMR and fencing of border will affect local people in relation to their land, friendships, history, culture, customs, economic, and everyday life. Those engaged in daily work and cultivation on both sides will by directly influenced by this. Mizoram is dependent on trade from Burma; thus, many Mizo businesses will face impacts. When the central government announced the abolishment of FMR and fencing border, on 16 May 2024, a peaceful demonstration was organized in Zokhawthar bordering Burma, and many people from both sides expressed their views in social media. Due to the 2021 coup and ongoing civil war in Burma, many Chin people fled to Mizoram for safety, where they were welcomed by the Mizo and given land to build camps, being treated as their brother and sister. In times of hardship and difficulties, the Mizo people have supported their brothers and sisters from Burma, Bangladesh, and Manipur.

They have provided and support as much as possible, even though the state is poor and has limited resources, and lacks of support from the central government and international community for the displaced people. NGOs in India also have limited funds, and it is difficult for them to address the refugee crisis in Mizoram. For this reason, the central government must

understand the situation of the borderland people and abstain from abolishing the FMR and fencing the border. The Chin people from these states are distinct from their states of citizenship, India and Burma. Indian and Burmese are considered foreigners and they are called "*Vai*" and "*Kawl*" in Mizoram and Chin State, respectively.

The central government of India's decision to abolish the FMR is unacceptable to the Chin from India and Burma. It will affect the idea of a future Greater Chinland (Zo nation). The fencing of border between India-Burma is strongly opposed by the Chin from both sides. The colonial and imperial Indian and Burma authorities continue trying to colonize Chin land through oppressive top-down politics, suppressing and uprooting the Chin people, their land, history, culture and identity in various ways. The central government of India must reconsider decisions related to the FMR issues and refrain from fencing the Indo-Burma border.

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Dangerous Channels: Mis/Dis/Mal-information and Hate Speech on Telegram in Post-Coup Myanmar

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Abstract

This study aims to raise awareness about the pernicious patterns of misinformation, mal-information, and hate speech that threaten Myanmar's digital and sociopolitical landscape. It focuses on the spread of mis/disinformation and mal-information on pro-regime Telegram channels in Myanmar after the coup in 2021. Beyond posing a threat to digital safety and security for pro-democracy groups, these channels have alarming instances of hate speech and dangerous speech targeting pro-democracy and anti-regime groups and accounts. This research employs a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analysis along with one-on-one key informant interviews. In the wake of the 2021 coup, the pro-military regime or SAC (State Administration Council) quickly shifted its primary information channel from Facebook to alternate platforms, including Telegram, highlighting the adaptability of disinformation networks. Responding to this shift, the research analyzed data from five Telegram channels, with anonymization measures in place to protect personal information from other Telegram users. The research faced limitations in verifying incidents in areas with limited internet connectivity, and some pro-regime channels were removed during the process. Furthermore, language barriers hinder insights into Telegram content featuring non-Burmese speakers. The findings reveal that mal-information is the dominant category on the pro-regime channels, at about 30% of analyzed content. This mal-information often combines factual information with selective narratives and portrays one-sided accusations. The Telegram channels frequently advocate for retaliatory military action while omitting or denying certain events. Doxing incidents are prevalent, with the findings revealing 16 documented cases of Telegram doxing resulting in arrests. Interviews with fact-checkers and journalists shed light on the motivations behind spreading misinformation and the tactics employed by SAC. The impact of mis/disinformation is evident in community trust, the economy, and social cohesion, leading to changes in public opinion. Doxing incidents have wide-ranging effects, from loss of property to loss of life and citizenship. Improving digital literacy, fact-checking, and monitoring efforts are essential to mitigate these issues. Telegram also needs to take part in greater responsibility by implementing policies on mis- and disinformation and hateful mal-information.

Keywords: Misinformation, Disinformation, Malinformation, Hate Speech, Telegram Channels, 2021 Coup, Myanmar, Doxing, Digital Security

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1. Introduction

The pervasive spread of mis/disinformation on Myanmar's social media landscape is a long-standing societal concern since before the 2021 coup. This study moves beyond the scope of mis/disinformation to dive into the spread of mal-information, the dominant phenomenon channeled through pro-regime Telegram Channels in Myanmar. The propagation of hateful one-sided narratives jeopardizes the security and digital well-being of the pro-democracy population, among other disconcerting dimensions. Our literature research brings to light the alarming presence of hate speech and dangerous speech targeting both democracy proponents and those opposing the SAC (Hayes, Heit, & Swendsen, 2010). Dangerous and threatening expressions find their breeding ground on uncensored Telegram channels endorsed by supporters of the regime. This study presents a thorough examination of five Telegram channels that support the Myanmar military/SAC while also disseminating propaganda. After our analytical endeavors, the study carried out a series of semi-structured interviews with journalists and fact-checkers to explore the multifaceted issues at hand. Through these interviews, we aim to present a nuanced understanding of the dynamics surrounding mal-information, hate speech, and the broader implications for Myanmar's digital and sociopolitical landscape.

It is noteworthy that in the aftermath of the coup, as military-related pages and accounts faced removal from Facebook (*Facebook takes down main page of Myanmar military*, 2021), the SAC supporters promptly shifted their information dissemination to alternate platforms, including Telegram. This strategic move highlights the increasing flexibility of disinformation networks and the ongoing challenges in addressing this issue. While the research contributes valuable insights, it is important to acknowledge the need to continue refining and enhancing the methodology for future research. We advocate for ongoing empirical research studies like this, whenever circumstances permit. By doing so, we hope to raise public awareness of digital literacy and safety, and foster a better understanding of and protection against the pernicious patterns of mis/disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech that pose significant threats to society.

2. Literature Review

Misinformation and disinformation represent two distinct but interrelated concepts. Misinformation refers to the dissemination of inaccurate or misleading information, often unintentional, while disinformation involves the deliberate spread of false information to deceive or manipulate. Misinformation can result from various sources, including human error, misinformation campaigns, or the echo-chamber effect (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). In contrast, disinformation typically involves state actors, political campaigns, or ideologically driven groups aiming to influence public opinion (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Mal-information is a relatively newer concept, describing the deliberate sharing of genuine information with the intent to harm, deceive, or manipulate the target audience (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). Mal-information often takes the form of selectively edited or 'taken-out-of-context' content and can be used as a tool to damage the reputation of individuals, groups, or institutions (Guess et al., 2019). In the context of Myanmar, mal-information has gained

prominence in pro-regime Telegram channels, where genuine information is manipulated to further the military's agenda. It is crucial to understand the unique challenges and implications of mal-information in this context. Hate speech can incite further hatred, violence, or discrimination against individuals or groups based on their identity, such as race, religion, or political affiliation (Waldron, 2012). Dangerous speech is a subset of hate speech that goes beyond mere expressions to incite violence and harm directly (Zittrain & Roberts, 2010). The consequences of hate speech and dangerous speech can be severe, leading to real-world violence and social division. The role of pro-regime Telegram channels in perpetuating such harmful expressions is a growing concern. The shift of pro-regime actors to alternate information ecosystems like Telegram is a strategic response to content moderation efforts on mainstream social media platforms. Telegram provides an encrypted and unregulated environment for the dissemination of content (Tufekci, 2017). The ease of (anonymously) creating and joining channels on Telegram has facilitated the rapid spread of both information and disinformation. To conclude, this literature review highlights the importance of understanding the intricate web of mis/disinformation, mal-information, hate speech, and the use of Telegram channels within the context of Myanmar's political landscape. The existing body of work underscores the urgency of addressing these issues to safeguard digital safety, political stability, and social cohesion within the country.

3. Aim and Objective of the Research

This research paper aims to provide an in-depth exploration of the dynamics surrounding the spread of mis/disinformation and mal-information on Pro-Regime/SAC supporters' Telegram channels in Myanmar. The primary objective is to thoroughly analyze the patterns and characteristics of mis/disinformation and mal-information as they are promoted on these channels. Building upon this foundation, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the motivations, tactics, and impacts of these phenomena within the specific context of pro-regime Telegram channels in Myanmar.

4. Methodology

4.1. Method

The data for this study was collected systematically over five months, from January 2023 to May 2023 (see Figure 1).

Through a mixed-method approach combining quantitative and qualitative textual data analysis, we hope to unravel the complexity of this information landscape. Our quantitative analysis will offer valuable insights into the frequency, volume, and dissemination patterns of hateful and dangerous content, shedding light on its prominence and reach within these channels. Meanwhile, our qualitative analysis will examine the content, themes, narratives, and potential impacts.

Ten one-on-one interviews were conducted with key informants to enrich our findings and provide a more comprehensive view. These interviews not only validate and contextualize the data but also enable us to capture the perspectives and experiences of individuals. In the range

of our trusted partners and close connections, over twenty people from the community who are related to the topic and have related background experiences were reached out for the interview through email or signal, and ten respondents were selected according to their willingness to participate in this study. These ten participants include people who have changed their careers from media reporters to fact-checkers, who are digital/cyber security instructors/trainers, participants who are currently working at a media house, human rights defenders, and analysts who monitor mis/disinformation and mal-information through automation, etc. We learned that some of these participants say that they often monitor Telegram channels for personal interest and watch fake news and doxing cases for work purposes. By employing the mixed-method approach, we aim to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the role and impact of mis/disinformation and mal-information within the specific context of pro-regime Telegram channels in Myanmar.

4.2. Data

The primary research method involved coding to extract post data from five selected pro-regime Telegram channels. A qualitative textual analysis discerned patterns of misinformation, negative sentiment, and the dissemination of mal-information within these five channels. Before extracting data from the Telegram channels, a scraping program was built using the open-source Telethon module. Following data extraction, a formula was used to determine the minimum sample size required for known population sizes. The channel with the highest number of posts necessitated a sample size of 340, while other channels had lower sampling requirements. Furthermore, in the interest of privacy and data protection, Personally Identifiable Information (PIIs) such as National Registration Cards (NRC), phone numbers, profile URLs, and email addresses were systematically replaced with corresponding tags for anonymization and confidentiality, for instance, <NRC>, and so forth. The qualitative aspect of this research used a descriptive and exploratory design to gain an in-depth understanding of the nuances and motivations surrounding the spread of mis/disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech on pro-regime Telegram channels. Qualitative data was also gathered through ten semi-structured interviews with relevant stakeholders, including journalists, fact-checkers, and individuals with direct experience of disinformation campaigns. Thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2014) was applied to understand the qualitative one-on-one interviews, and qualitative textual analysis (Andreotta et al., 2019) was used to identify, analyze, and report patterns, themes, and narratives within the qualitative data extracted from selected Telegram channels. The analysis process involved coding the interview transcripts, grouping similar codes into themes, and deriving meaning from the data.

4.3. Ethical Considerations

Informed consent was obtained from all interviewees, ensuring they were aware of the research purpose, their voluntary participation, anonymity, and data confidentiality. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Data collected was stored securely, and access was limited to authorized research staff to prevent data breaches and ensure the confidentiality of participants. All qualitative data, including interview transcripts,

audio recordings, and coded materials, were organized and managed efficiently throughout the research process.

Figure 1: Distribution of the sample size for Telegram data

ID	Channel	Start Date	End Date (Exclusive)	N Posts Total	N Posts Uploaded	Min Sample Size
20230101_20230601_kyawswar96999	https://t.me/kyawswar96999	2023-01-01	2023-06-01	3,181.00	500	342
20230101_20230601_kothetjournalist	https://t.me/kothetjournalist	2023-01-01	2023-06-01	4,396.00	500	353
20230101_20230601_hminewai	https://t.me/hminewai	2023-01-01	2023-06-01	3,101.00	500	341
20230101_20230601_babanyunt	https://t.me/babanyunt	2023-01-01	2023-06-01	3,626.00	500	347
20230101_20230601_shweba000	https://t.me/shweba000	2023-01-01	2023-06-01	1,870.00	500	318

5. Finding and Discussion

5.1. Negative Tone, Accusation and Hate Speech

5.1.1. Total Distribution

Figure 2: Distribution of negative cases

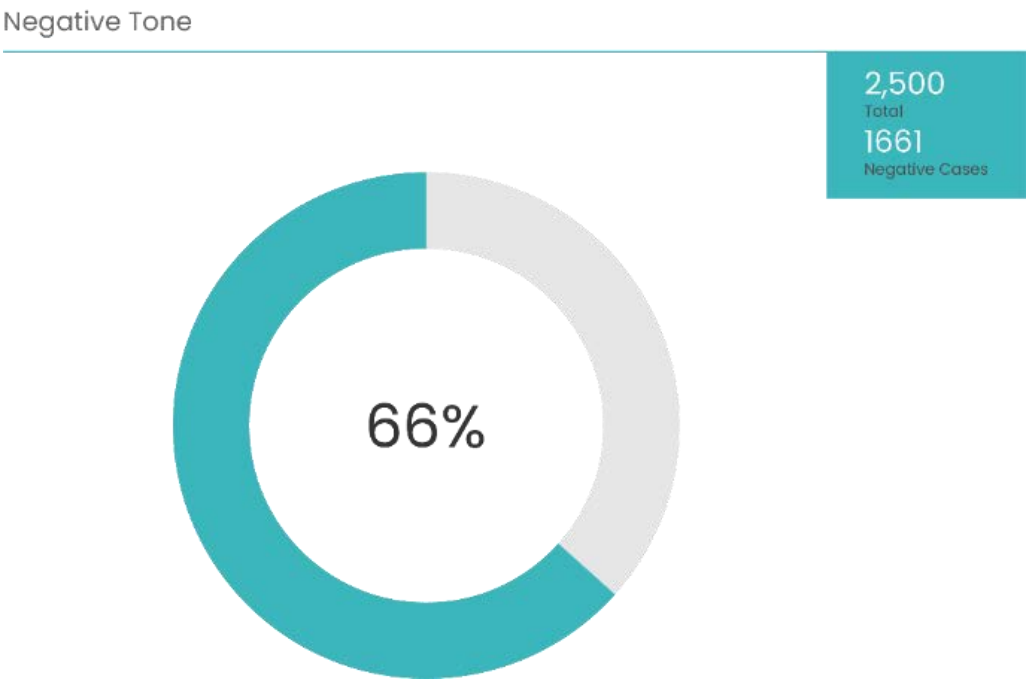
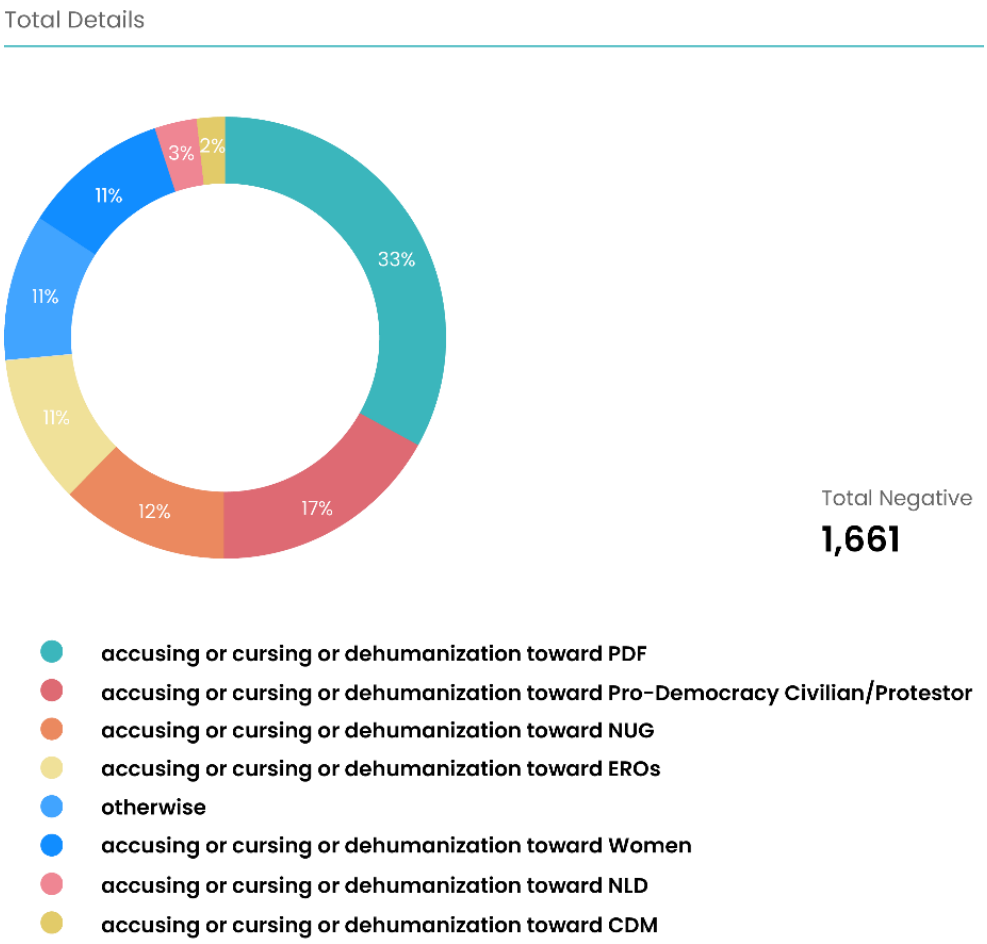


Figure 3: Percentage of tone details in negative cases



A significant portion of the discourse was directed towards the People's Defense Forces (PDFs), comprising 33 percent of the total (see figure 3). Next, posts targeting pro-democracy civilians and protesters accounted for 17 percent. In contrast, discussions related to the CDMs (Civil Disobedience Movement) registered the lowest frequency at 2 percent. These discussions enclose a spectrum of issues, including the spread of mis/disinformation, mal-information, and doxing. There is a recurring theme of conversations centered on destructive actions, such as the targeting of EROs headquarters with calls for retaliatory violence. Some instances extend to threats and attacks against the United States, various foreign countries, and international organizations who support sanctions against the SAC. The discourse is further complicated by the mixed use of images that are challenging to authenticate and fact check. Additionally, reports of deceased individuals lacked specific locations or incident details. Notably, references to arrests, imprisonments, and criminal prosecutions are frequently interwoven throughout the dialogue. The discourse also features allegations of financial mismanagement against revolutionary forces, sometimes implicating all these forces collectively. It is worth noting that among the implicated entities, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Karen National Union (KNU), PDF, and NUG emerge as the most prominently involved parties in these allegations.

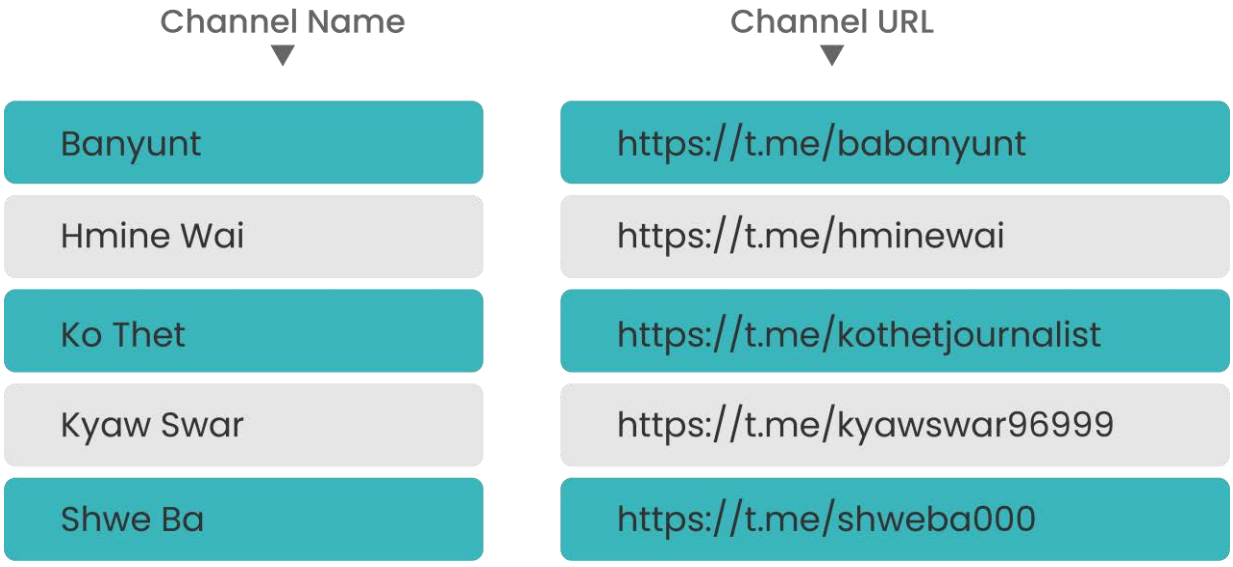
5.1.2. Hate Speech Towards PDFs

PDFs are the primary focus of attacks, with 33 percent of the total 1,661 negative cases in the study (see Figure 3). Among the five channels (see figure 4), the Hmine Wai channel and Kyaw Swar channel had almost the same amount of offensive intentions on PDFs (see figure 5). Some of the hate speech can be recorded as following discussions. In the regions neighboring Kachin and Sagaing, there are claims suggesting that PDF members aligning with the KIA are involved in the burning of villages and tend to withdraw when confronted by the military. There are recurrent accusations labeling them as a group prone to internal conflicts, sometimes branded as "murderous terrorist PDFs." These accusations depict them as individuals who disrupt communal activities, including instances of public obstruction.

5.1.3. Hate Speech Towards Civilian Protestors

The second most attacked category is Civilian protestor/ pro-democracy groups or individuals with 17 percent of the 1,661 negative cases (see Figure 3). Among them, the following activities are included: accusations of misuse of funding, labeling as terrorist supporters, doxing, and arrest cases. By revisiting the historical backdrop of past coups, a leader from the ABSDF (All Burma Students' Democratic Front) faced accusations of financial impropriety during the 1988 uprising. In 2021, a prominent supporter of the NUG similarly engaged in Telegram channels, leveling allegations of financial mismanagement against the military's adversaries. Notably, two renowned artists, who had previously been detained and subsequently released, were encouraged to participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and were criticized for continuing their involvement in the arts. They resorted to using derogatory slang terms, referring to NLD supporters as "Nepein," while disparagingly characterizing them as lacking in discernment.

Figure 4: List of Telegram channels



5.1.4. Hate Speech towards EROs

Figure 5: List of offensive keywords used at EAOs by channels

Channel Name Accused KIA	
Ko Thet	21
Kyaw Swar	11
Hmine Wai	7
Banyubt	4
Shwe Ba	4
Total	**47**

Channel Name Accused KNU	
Ko Thet	19
Hmine Wai	14
Kyaw Swar	14
Shwe ba	9
Banyunt	1
Total	**57**

Among the five channels, Ko Thet channel carried out the most attacks on EROs (see Figure 5). The findings indicate that all five channels had the highest number of attacks directed at the KIA and KNU, involving the use of offensive words. Additionally, other EROs, such as Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army (AA), and Karenni National Progressive Party (KNPP), were also targeted. Some examples of the channel's content can be documented as follows: It is said that the changes in positions within the KIA organization are because they support the NUG, and there are differences of opinion. There are also calls for the KIA headquarters to be bombed because they have killed more than 60 Buddhist monks in Sagaing (see Figure 6). Another ERO, the KNU/KNLA organization, is also accused of trying to destroy the country throughout its history.

Figure 6: Example post of hate speech towards EROs

They (KIA) killed more than 60 monks in Sagaing region. KIA headquarter should be bombing.

Analysis: Accusation cannot be verified

https://t.me/kothetjournalist/43494

5.1.5. Hate Speech Towards Women

Notably, attacks on women can be found in 11 percent of the 1,661 negative cases (see Figure 3). The hate speech consists of targeting a woman NUG minister, female artists, women who support NUG, and Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. A female NUG minister was allegedly attacked over her request to the British foreign minister to recognize the NUG (see Figure 7). There are also verbal attacks on women artists who are doing revolutionary activities. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was attacked by comments including those that say she has destroyed more than her father, General Aung San Maeng's work. A prominent female supporter was attacked with petty physical discrimination words.

Zin Mar Aung is sacrificed by her life and demanding British foreign minister. She will only know what is being sacrificed.

Analysis: Accusation and defamation by insulted illustration; https://t.me/shweba000/372

Figure 7: Example post of hate speech towards women

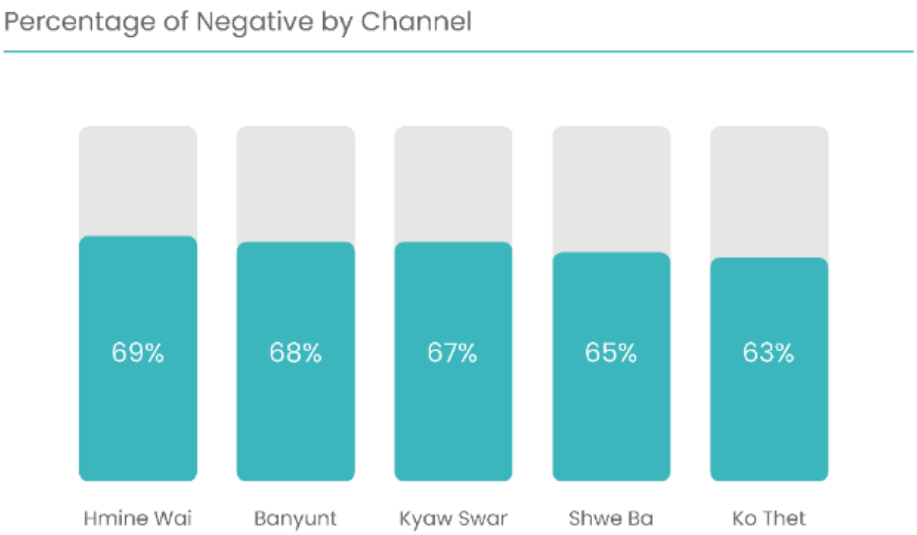
5.1.6. Hate Speech towards CDMers

The lowest percentage of negative cases is the CDM, with 2 percent of the 1,661 cases in this study (see Figure 3). However, it still included doxing, defamation, and misinformation. The narrative used makes people think that participating in the civil disobedience movement was a mistake. They labeled health workers who have undergone CDM as activists for PDFs (PDFs were labeled as a terrorist group), and soldiers who have undergone CDM were called deserters and often disparaged as hiding in the jungle in collaboration with a terrorist group (PDFs were labeled as a terrorist group). Women CDMs were falsely accused of resorting to prostitution and found in border karaoke bars. Another accusation was that the call for CDM is futile and irresponsible, saying that school teachers are now working as prostitutes at the border.

5.1.7. Channel Analysis

The total distribution of hate speech, misinformation, disinformation, mal-information, and doxing cases across all five channels shows similarities in percentages. According to Figure 8, the highest percentage of hateful content per channel is at 69 percent, while the lowest is at 63 percent. One significant observation is that all channels actively contribute to the production of negative cases.

Figure 8: Percentage of negative or hate speech distribution by channels



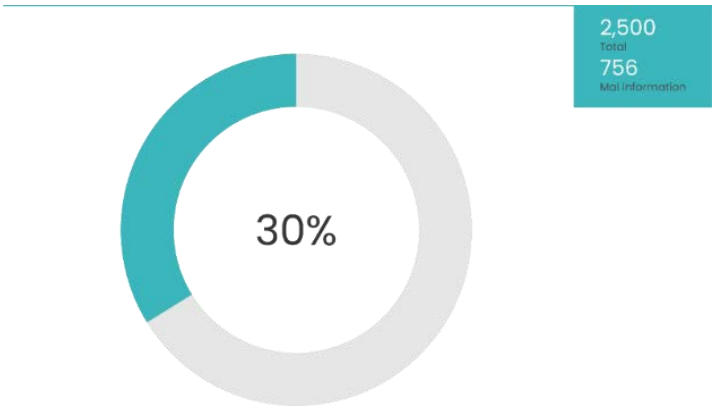
5.2. Mis/Dis-information and Mal-information

In this research, our approach predominantly revolves around an inductive research framework, highlighting three primary facets: Mis/Disinformation, Mal-information, and Hate Speech (Dangerous Speech) as observed on Pro-Regime Telegram Channels in the post-2021 coup landscape. Due to various constraints, we gathered data from five Telegram channels spanning the period from January 2023 to June 2023, totaling 2,500 posts, which then became the foundation for our research. Within this dataset, we discovered a noteworthy prevalence of Mal-information, constituting approximately 30% of the content for five months. This surpassed the extent of Mis/Disinformation, marking Mal-information as the dominant category. Our findings highlight that these reports exhibited a blend of factual information alongside elements that were challenging to fact check. These Telegram accounts often featured one-sided accusations, serving to disseminate a selective narrative. For instance, following airstrikes by the State Administration Council (SAC), Telegram channels frequently advocated for retaliatory military action, even though the targeted areas were often mines and evacuation camps. In response, the Telegram channels counter-alleged that the airstrikes targeted weapons manufacturing facilities rather than mines. Furthermore, the victims of these acts of violence were portrayed either as supporters of the NLD party or non-supporters, while the perpetrators, regardless of their affiliation with the USDP, were frequently accused of being PDFs. In some instances, these dialogues exhibited inherent contradictions, with PDFs tending to project themselves as the instigators of criminal acts. An undertone of portraying PDFs as being undervalued is discernible throughout these narratives. Moreover, the Telegram channels often reported clashes and raids on village defense posts in proximity to residential areas. Yet, upon cross-referencing these incidents with independent news media, it became apparent that residential villages were indeed subject to raids and arson. These Telegram channels, however, routinely omitted or denied the veracity of such events. Additionally, Civil Disobedience Movements (CDMs) were subjected to defamation, with certain festivities exploited to sow discord between urban populations and regions experiencing severe turmoil across the country. Counter-revolutionary news were also frequently disseminated, as observed on the day of the

Silence strike, depicting the movements of people. In sum, it became evident that the strategic inclusion of a blend of accurate facts within news reports was leveraged as a means of advancing a one-sided narrative, thus conveying its desired message.

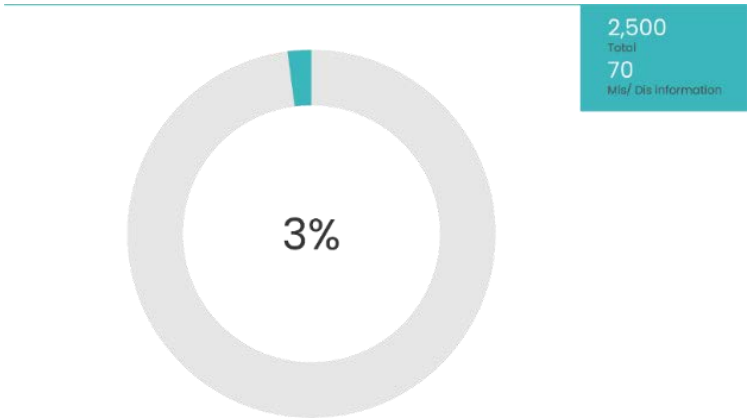
5.3. Mal Information

Figure 9: Distribution of malinformation



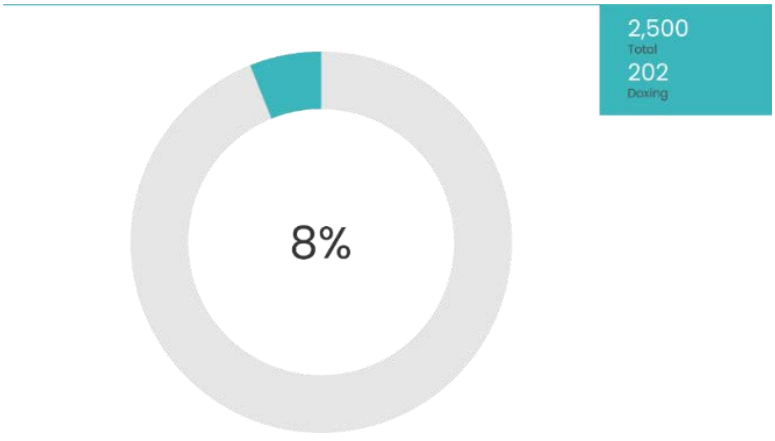
5.4. Mis and Dis-Information

Figure 10: Distribution of mis- and disinformation



5.5. Doxing

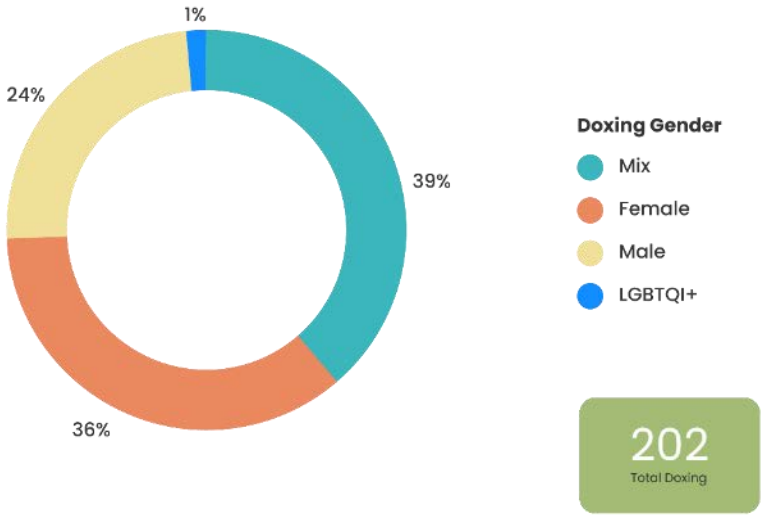
Figure 11: Distribution of doxing cases



We identified a total of 202 doxing cases, constituting approximately 8 percent of our sample size of 2,500 posts. Among these 202 doxing incidents, we have records of 16 cases that resulted in arrests. However, for the remaining 186 cases, we were unable to verify whether arrests were made or not. The doxing cases involved individuals of various gender categories, including Male, Female, and Mixed. The Mixed category pertains to situations involving both male and female individuals who were doxed together in a single post, often targeting an entire organization and exposed to public scrutiny. Additionally, some posts were directed at the LGBTQ+ community, although their frequency was not substantial, so we grouped these cases under the Mixed category. All gender categories, including CDM, PDF, EROs, and pro-democracy/protest were affected by doxing incidents. Specifically, 36 percent of the total cases involved female individuals, 24 percent involved males, and the Mixed category accounted for 40 percent of the cases, as indicated in the accompanying figure

5.6. Doxing Gender

Figure 12: Gender comparison of doxing cases

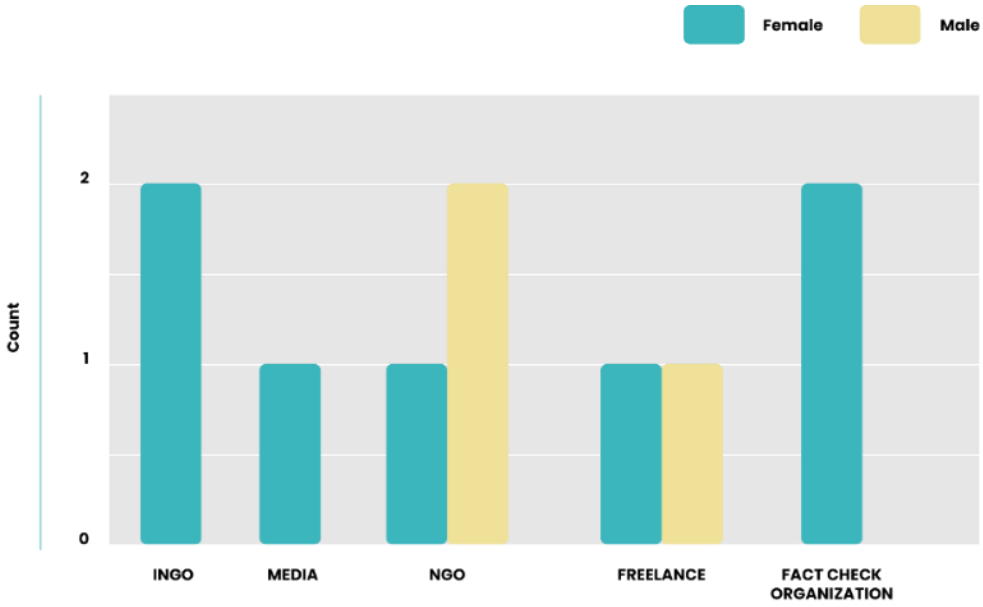


6. Qualitative Analysis

We conducted a total of 10 interviews involving a diverse array of stakeholders, including representatives from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), international non-governmental organizations (INGOs), media outlets, fact-checking organizations, and freelance media professionals (see Figure 13). These interviews aimed to gather multifaceted insights and perspectives on the research's focal subjects.

The gender composition of these interviews was 7 female and 3 male participants hailing from the aforementioned organizations. This gender diversity among the interviewees contributed to a well-rounded and inclusive discussion.

Figure 13: Distribution of interviewees' information



6.1. Social Media Experience of the Interviewee

Participants have exposure in Cyber Security, Digital literacy, Media Journalism, Social Media Research, Human Rights, Digital Rights, and Mis- & Dis-information Fact-Checking. All categories included providing training, monitoring mis and dis information, and raising awareness of the public regarding digital literacy.

Figure 14: Distribution of interviewees' responses to the spread of mis/disinformation platforms after the 2021 coup

6.2. Channels that are Spreading Mis/Dis Information

Most participants agreed that Telegram was the source of pro-regime's mis and dis information production. Eighty percent of participants mentioned at least once the "Han Nyein Oo" Telegram channel name. However, a few of them mentioned other channel names as well.

6.3. Motivation and Tactics

Respondents had different opinions on the purpose of producing fake news. They said that Telegram is used as a tool to influence public opinion, confuse, ridicule, isolate and incite revolutionary forces, discredit reliable sources of information, make only selected information known to the public, and possibly to weaken revolutionaries and revolutionary movements. A respondent fact checker said that such intentions not only target the opponents of the military council but also the supporters of the military council.

An individual who studies mis and dis information from an INGO also noted that by spreading misinformation over and over again, there may be an intention to confuse the public and fact-checkers. "It's like saying "Fake it until you make it," sometimes we know that they are wrong, but we don't know if they are right. Until they think like that, they will deliberately misrepresent it." According to the discussions, Telegram channels are taking a variety of approaches to spread fake news. It is said that such methods often include religious beliefs and topics related to race. A fact checker said that as the public refuses to accept certain forms of misinformation immediately, religious and ethnic content may be used, and such content may be aimed at a public with poor knowledge of the news, and its impact is difficult to measure. According to an independent study of mis and dis information by an INGO, sometimes military supporters present arguments to each other in an attempt to draw the attention of readers. Another way to divert attention from the fighting and bombings is to broadcast counter-news and make a series of arrests. Regarding the arrests, they could not independently confirm the connection.

Since the coup, internet restrictions have been imposed, and most social media sites require a VPN (virtual private network), whereas the Telegram application does not need a VPN. A human rights activist said that in addition to false information from supporters of the military, state-owned newspapers also spread false information. Regarding that topic, although we have no proof, we found that private organizations named as news media departments were involved in Telegram's disinformation distribution.

6.4. Impact of Mis/Dis information

Most participants are worried about the impact of mis and disinformation. Mis and dis information tries to flip the community's trust level and confuse the public in a way that tricks people into believing a certain narrative. As one participant pointed out, there is impact on the economy as well. As soon as economic-related mis and disinformation spreads to the public, the market price tends to be higher than usual. Additionally, social impact can also result, as people try to cut off communication when information strikes as emotional. Also, for the people where reliable news is hard to reach, they could be completely immersed in the narrative. For instance, there are families of Myanmar Military soldiers (not officers) who must stay in the military compound with strict information controls. Furthermore, reputation is made questionable after all this misinformation influences the public. In summary, when it comes to things that are directly related to people's interests, respondents are quite nervous about the potential for information to change public opinion on politics.

6.5. Experience of Doxing Incidents

Based on the interviews, 9 out of 10 respondents personally experienced doxing or arrest or had close friends doxed via Telegram channels. In addition, not only were people from within the country being doxed for revealing information but even people from outside the country. For example, those who lived at the border were bribed with rewards for capturing them, etc.

There are different opinions regarding the purpose of these arrests, such as threatening to oppose the military, not wanting to be involved in politics, weakening the revolution, as well as personal hatred. There is also a review of how online intelligence strategies have changed over time. "The fewer people there are to oppose them, the easier it is for them to build the dictatorship they want," an interviewee said of the effects of pro-regime Telegram channels. He said whether they are arrested or not, the impact can range from low to very severe, ranging from loss of property, changes in lifestyle, arrest, imprisonment and torture to loss of life. Physical and emotional harm can be seen not only on the target but also on their family members and friends. In addition, there is also potential loss of citizenship.

6.6. Prevention, Mitigation, and Final Thoughts

With the rise of mis/dis information, trust issues emerge for journalists and fact-checkers even if they know the source of a certain piece of news. They tend to view anything as a rumor, even if the source is reputable. In our research, we found that journalists and fact-checkers faced similar challenges and are constantly faced with difficult situations when verifying news posted on Telegram. Fact checkers themselves said they still don't know what measures to take to account for this. After the coup, pro-democracy supporters stopped using real, true-name accounts to protect their identities. Thus, almost everyone began using fake-name accounts, which is very hard to verify. One respondent said that even though he collected data from over 400 Telegram channels, this was not enough to know what information was true versus mis/dis information.

Regarding Telegram's policies and responsibility, the respondents' suggestions and the findings of Telegram's research were consistent. Graphic images were not censored and copyright protection was weak. "Telegram is very weak in terms of policy. Not when this kind of thing is happening, and even if it's content that children shouldn't watch, they don't take it down. They're weak in copyright. They don't follow a situation and then change a policy, (even if) everyone needs it. They should apply a policy on misinformation and disinformation. I think that they have not reached this level yet" [Interview #4, conducted on 21 August 2023].

Regarding the practice of doxing, some of the respondents reported that the personally revealing data came from Facebook and was then re-posted to Telegram, highlighting the importance of digital safety knowledge regarding personal data on social media. One of the fact-checker respondents revealed that the spread and reach of fake news was more than that of fact-checked news from reputable sources. He compared Telegram to Facebook and said there should be a team to ensure responsibility and accountability, and monitoring should be done. However, if it is not on the Telegram platform, it is said that the only thing that can be done is raising people's digital literacy skills, as propaganda can still be used on other platforms. For example, when talking about false news, we should include information about

why it was confirmed as false news and discuss providing awareness and debunking of false claims.

6.7. Limitation

There were certain limitations encountered in conducting the quantitative coding, primarily caused by the lack of accessible sources to verify incidents in areas with limited internet connectivity. This also made it challenging to obtain real-time, on-the-ground situational data. Furthermore, it is worth noting that one of the five pro-regime channels was removed by the Telegram company during the coding process. When coding for quantitative categorization, variations in classification arose because it was not feasible to differentiate conversations involving key individuals and specific organizations. For example, when grouping allegations involved the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), women, National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar (NUG) members, People Defense Force (PDF), and Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs), it led to data confusion and hindered the achievement of a clear research objective. In the case of qualitative coding, limitations arose due to the sensitivity of the research subject matter, resulting in a restricted pool of interviewees. Additionally, the questionnaire format was designed to evoke profound insights, but not all participants responded to every question with the same level of depth. Furthermore, as SAC supporters predominantly use the Burmese language to target the Burmese population, gaining an in-depth perspective from non-Burmese speakers and the international community proved to be challenging. When examining doxing cases on pro-regime Telegram channels, specifically in the context of disinformation or mal-information, it is important to note that while we were able to document certain instances leading to arrests resulting from doxing, it was not always possible to verify whether arrests occurred in every single doxing case.

7. Conclusion

In the face of Myanmar's evolving sociopolitical landscape and the relentless dissemination of mis/disinformation and mal-information, this study has shed light on the profound challenges and consequences experienced by its citizens. The research uncovered a disconcerting prevalence of mal-information, which constituted the dominant category of content within pro-regime Telegram channels, surpassing traditional mis/disinformation. The amalgamation of factual information with selective narratives is a potent weapon, serving to advance one-sided viewpoints and manipulate public perception. These channels, which frequently advocate for retaliatory military action while downplaying or denying certain events, pose significant threats to digital and physical safety, political stability, and social cohesion in Myanmar. Doxing incidents have inflicted harm on individuals and their families, from loss of property, loss of life, and even loss of citizenship. The impact of these actions extends beyond the immediate targets, causing distress and uncertainty throughout society. This research highlights the pressing need for both national and international stakeholders to address these issues comprehensively, from digital literacy and fact-checking to monitoring and policy implementation. To combat the pervasive spread of mis/disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech, individuals and organizations must prioritize raising public awareness and fostering a culture of critical thinking. Fact-checking efforts, though important, cannot bear the

entire burden of verifying the avalanche of information that floods the digital landscape. Telegram, as a platform of choice for the dissemination of such content, must assume greater responsibility by implementing and enforcing policies to curtail the spread of false information. In the wake of the 2021 coup, the shift of information sources to alternate platforms signifies the agility of disinformation networks. As these challenges persist and evolve, the lessons drawn from this research should serve as a clarion call for ongoing empirical studies and collective efforts to safeguard Myanmar's digital and sociopolitical landscape. Only by comprehending the intricacies of these issues and working collaboratively can society hope to mitigate the destructive impact of mis/disinformation, mal-information, and hate speech and maintain the integrity of public discourse and digital safety.

7.1. Recommendations

1. Support and enhance fact-checking organizations and initiatives within Myanmar. Encourage collaboration among these organizations and provide resources to help them verify and debunk false information, ultimately reducing the spread of deceptive content on digital platforms.
2. An imperative next step involves conducting a survey that compares public viewpoints on Telegram channels with those from independent news media.
3. Engage with social media platforms like Telegram to ensure they take a more proactive role in moderating content, especially when it involves hate speech, disinformation, or mal-information. Advocating for stricter content policies and enforcement mechanisms can help curb the dissemination of harmful information.
4. Engage with international partners and organizations to coordinate efforts in countering mis/disinformation and promoting digital safety in Myanmar. Collaborative research, knowledge sharing, and capacity-building programs can strengthen the resilience of Myanmar's society against digital threats.
5. Foster collaboration between research organizations and fact-checkers to facilitate the verification and debunking of false information in real time, increasing the accuracy of the information available to the public.

Acronyms

All Burma Students' Democratic Front	ABSDF
Arakan Army	AA
Civil Disobedience Movement	CDM
Ethnic Revolutionary Organization	EROs
International Non-Governmental Organization	INGO
Kachin Independence Army	KIA
Karen National Union	KNU

Karenni National Progressive Party	KNPP
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender	LGBT
National League for Democracy	NLD
Non-Governmental Organization	NGO
People Defense Force	PDF
State Administration Council	SAC
Ta'ang National Liberation Army	TNLA
The National Unity Government of the Republic of the Union of Myanmar	NUG
Union Solidarity and Development Party	USDP
United States of America	USA

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Sociolinguistic Study of Min Thu Wun's 'Thabyay Nyo' Poem: Present Perspectives in Myanmar

Moon[31]

Abstract

This paper will describe the current perspectives in Myanmar through Min Thu Wun's "Thabyay Nyo" poem within the context of Sociolinguistics. The objective of this paper is to analyze the impact of Min Thu Wun's "Thabyay Nyo" poem not only on Myanmar's struggle for independence during the colonial period but also on the aspiration to establish a federal Myanmar in the present. "Thabyay Nyo" poem was written by Min Thu Wun (1904-2004), the father of Myanmar President U Htin Kyaw (2016-2018), a prominent Burmese poet, writer, and scholar. He penned the poem on January 4, 1938, while studying at Oxford University in England. "Thabyay Nyo" poem was first published in No. 1, Vol. 7 of the O-Way Magazine in 1938. On January 4, 1948, 10 years after Min Thu Wun wrote this poem, Myanmar gained independence. Sociolinguistics, which explores the relationship between language and culture, serves as the methodological framework for examining how the "Thabyay Nyo" poem intersects with Myanmar's social and political landscape in this qualitative research. The research seeks to address the following questions: (1) What elements from the "Thabyay Nyo" poem contributed to Myanmar's social and political impact? (2) How did the "Thabyay Nyo" poem renew itself in the current Myanmar situation? Today, the Thabyay flower is a symbol of hope for Myanmar. The Thabyay Flower Campaign was held in Myanmar as a fight for Democracy, reflecting their belief that the Thabyay flower brings success and prosperity in spring revolutions.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, Qualitative Research, Thabyay Nyo Poem, Language and Culture, Social and Political Landscape

1. Introduction

This paper will explore the current perspectives in Myanmar by analyzing Min Thu Wun's "Thabyay Nyo" poem (1938) within the framework of Sociolinguistics. The poem draws on the symbolism of 'Thabyay,' the national flower of Myanmar, and 'Nyo,' which signifies brown. In Myanmar culture, the Thabyay Nyo flower (Eugenia flower), symbolizes success in all aspects of life. However, the socio-political landscape in Myanmar shifted dramatically on February 1, 2021, when military forces arrested the country's leaders in a coup. Subsequently, a significant portion of the Myanmar population engaged in Civil Disobedience Movements, seeking freedom and restoration of democracy amidst the turmoil caused by the coup. This

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paper will describe the societal implications of these events and their impact on the perspectives of the people in present Myanmar.

1.1. Aim

The objective of this paper is to analyze the impact of Min Thu Wun's "Thabyay Nyo" poem not only on Myanmar's struggle for independence during the colonial period but also on the aspiration to establish a federal Myanmar in the present period.

1.1.1. Hypothesis

The Thabyay flower (Eugenia) is a symbol of hope for the present day Myanmar. The Thabyay Flower Campaign was held in Myanmar as a fight for Democracy, reflecting Myanmar's belief that the Thabyay flower brings success and prosperity in spring revolutions.

1.1.2. Background of the Problem

The background on how the poet Min Thu Wun wrote 'Thabyay Nyo" poem is also interesting. While studying at Oxford University in England, the great master went to Wales on a school holiday at the end of 1937, and while staying at St. Daniel's library, he wrote the poem "Thabyay Nyo" on January 4, 1938, the day before returning to Oxford University.

In the winter of 1937 and 1938, for two months from December to January, the poet Min Thu Wun resided in a bedroom within a library in a township of North Wales, Great Britain. He was accompanied by Ko Ohn Maung during this period. It was during this time that they received distressing news about the martyrs fighting for independence in their homeland, Burma, causing deep sorrow and propelling him to write the "Thabyay Nyo poem" on January 4, 1938.

It is said that the poem written by Min Thu Wun on January 4, 1938, ten years before independence, was printed and distributed throughout Burma by U Sein Tin (Theippan Maung Wa), Secretary of the Myanmar Information Department, on the verge of World War II. At that time, Min Thu Wun was still in England.

Min Thu Wun composed the poem "Thabyay Nyo" with the belief that this was a blessed plant of Myanmar. This paper focuses on how the Thabyay Nyo flower still impacts present Myanmar life. The research questions are

(1) What elements from the "Thabyay Nyo" poem contributed to Myanmar's social and political impact?
(2) How did the "Thabyay Nyo" poem renew itself in the current Myanmar situation?

1.1.3. Methodology

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society, focusing on how language is used in different social contexts and how it reflects and influences social structures and norms. Language is central to social interaction in every society, regardless of location and time period. Language and social interaction have a reciprocal relationship: language shapes social interactions and social interactions shape language. Regarding the publication of the "Thabyay Nyo" poem and Myanmar's independence, the "Thabyay Nyo" poem was first published in No. 1, Vol. 7 of the O-Way Magazine in 1938.

Exactly 10 years after Min Thu Wun wrote this poem, Myanmar gained independence from colonial rule on January 4, 1948. Sociolinguistics, a field that examines the relationship between language and culture, serves as the methodological framework for analyzing how the "Thabyay Nyo" poem intersects with Myanmar's social and political landscape in this qualitative research.

Language has its functions in sociolinguistics. C. Criper and H.G. Widdowson (1975) distinguished seven factors of language functions. They are

(1) Referential function (ရည်ညွှန်းတာဝန်)

(2) Expressive or emotive function (ခံစားမှုပြတာဝန်)

(3) Directive function (ညွှန်ကြားတာဝန်)

(4) Phatic or contact function (ဆက်သွယ်မှုပြတာဝန်)

(5) Contextual function (လှုမှုအခြေပြတာဝန်)

(6) Metalinguistics function (ဖွင့်ဆိုရှင်းပြတာဝန်)

(7) Poetic function.32 (ဖွဲ့နွဲ့ရှင်းပြတာဝန်)

Thus, this paper will focus on seven language functions of sociolinguistics.

1.1.4. Brief Biography of Min Thu Wun

Figure 1: Min Thu Wun[33]

Min Thu Wun was born to U Lwan Pin and Daw Mi on February 10, 1909 in Kungyangon, Mon State. His original name was U Wun and he was the second of seven siblings. He was of Mon and Bamar descent.[34]

Min Thu Wun was a Burmese artist, ess

ayist, and researcher who propelled another age abstract development called Khit-San (Testing the Times) in Burma. He was the father of Htin Kyaw, the President of Myanmar from March 30, 2016 to March 21, 2018. He began composing ballads at 20 years old for Rangoon College

[32]Criper&Widdowson, 1975,195-197.
[33] www.wikipedia.org
[34] http://wikipedia.org/wiki/ Min Thu Wun (accessed on 6.6.2024)

(later Rangoon University) magazine. It was in college that he, alongside alternate understudies of Professor Pe Maung Tin—Theippan Maung Wa and Zawgyi, spearheaded the Hkit san style of short stories and lyrics, distributed in the college magazine and Ganda Lawka (World of Books) magazine, which he altered under the tutelage of J S Furnivall, the originator of the Burma Research Society. In 1935, Min Thu Wun got his graduate degree in Burmese writing. He went to learn at Oxford University and accomplished a four-year college education in writing in 1939.

In a book survey, Min Thu Wun clarified the way of "light" and "genuine" writing. He went ahead to make the Burmese form of Braille for the visually impaired. He likewise ordered Mon —Burmese and Pali —Burmese word references. In 1990, he was chosen as a National League for Democracy (NLD) Member of Parliament, even though he had to surrender 8 years later due to pressure from the military administration. Additionally, his work had been prohibited from production. A prominent production called Sapei Gya-ne (Literary Journal) was likewise obstructed in its endeavor to commit its June 1995 issue to Min Thu Wun. He passed away on August 15, 2004 at 95 years old.[35]

1.1.5. Literature Review

The poem is titled "Thabyay Nyo" (Eugenia in English). Min Thu Wun wrote "Thabyay Nyo" on January 4, 1938. It was printed and distributed throughout Myanmar by the Secretary of the Myanmar Information Department, U Sein Tin (Theikpan Maung Wa), on the verge of World War II. At that time, Min Thu Wun was still in England and U Thein Han (Zawgyi) was preparing to go there. The Thabyay Nyo and Other Poems book was published in 1941. There are three paragraphs: at the end of the stanza, add a big stanza, and then three stanzas. It is described in three main sections. The 1941 book, Thabyay Nyo and Other Poems, was published for the third time before independence. After independence, this book was printed several more times. In its third edition (1941), the paragraph is written in the form of four ratio. Min Thu Wun said, "The Burmese people believe that the tree is a blessed tree. The leaves and leaves of the tree are called the flower. The Zambu Thabyay tree is a large tree that grows in Zambudate Island. Zambudate Island is said to be the island where the Zambu Thabyay tree grows south of Myint Mo Mountain." According to the scriptures, it is a big tree that can stand around the world. The height of the Zambu Thabyay tree is 100 yuzana[36]. The circumference of the trunk is 30 yuzana. Zambudate Kyun U, which has this unique characteristic, was named after the Zambu Thabyay tree, and they believed that the tree is a blessed plant in Myanmar's social sphere (Aung Myint Oo, Dr., 2020).

In Takkatho Win Mon's book, *Modern Poetry Introduction* (1968), it is written that Min Thu Wun heard the news of the Third Lord's Conference of the Burma Association held in March 1947 and the news that the nation's spirit of patriotism was awakening. The old, the young and all classes of Myanmar were working together for independence. Min Thu Wun believed that

[35] https://www.myanmars.net/history/famous-people/min-thu-wun.html
[36] 1 Yuzana = 19200 feets.

Myanmar's independence would be achieved soon. Ten years after "Thabye Nyo" had been written, on January 4, 1948, Myanmar gained independence.

Figure 2: January 4, 1948 Myanmar Independence Day[37]

Regarding the analysis of a poem from a sociolinguistics perspective, Dr. Mon Mon Aung presented on "A sociolinguistics study of Maung Lin Kyi's poem 'I will come back shortly, the day after tomorrow'" (2018). The 5th International Conference l "Language, Society, and Culture in Asian Contexts (LSCAC 2018)" ISBN: 978 602 162 2480 (Page 842-862).

Min Thu Wun's writing of the "Thabyay Nyo" poem and the research from Maung Lin Kyi's poem that uses aspects of sociolinguistics reveals a need to further analyze the sociolinguistic aspects of the "Thabyay Nyo" poem. This paper aims to address this gap in the aspects of Sociolinguistics.

1.2. Corpus of Thabyay Nyo Poem

Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia)

Min Thu Wun wrote the Thabyay Nyo poem types of four ratios.

	Myanmar	Phonetics	English
Poem Title	သပြေညို့	/ D« bje o/	Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia)
First Stanza	သူ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို့၊ ငါ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို့။ ။	//Tu. gaun: hma dE. D« bje o/ /N«. gaun: hma dE. D« bje o/	Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower (is) on his head. Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower(is) on my head

[37] https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo-on-4-january-1948-myanmar-became-an-independent-republic-named-the-122885955.html

Second Stanza	တို့ပြေမှာ တို့မေကမ်းပါတဲ့၊ သပြေညိုရွှေဘိုပန်းဟာက၊ လန်းလျက်ပါကို။ ။	/do. Pje hma do. me-kan: ba dE. D« bje o Swe bo pan: ha ka Lan: hlE/ pa ko/	At our country, our lady gives the Thabyay Nyo from township of Shwe Bo , It's refreshing.
Third Stanza	ဘာမလျှော့လေနဲ့၊ လာတော့မကွဲ့ရွှေပဟိုရ်၊ လေချိုကအသွေး။ ။	/ba ma SO. Le nE. la dO. ma kwE. Swe ba ho Le tɕho ga «Twe:/	Don't give up. Shwe Paho royal Drum will come, A sweet breeze blows.
Fourth Stanza	လင်းကြက်အဆော်၊ ကွင်းထက်မှာတူပျော်ပျော်နဲ့၊ စည်တော်ကို ရည်မျှော်မှန်းကာပ၊ ရောင်နီမှာအောင်စည်ရွမ်းရအောင်၊ သပြေညိုရွှေဘိုပန်းရယ်နဲ့၊ လှုမ်းကြစို့လေး။ ။	/ lin: tɕE/ a hsO Kwin: thE/ hma tu pjO bjO nE. sI dO go jI hmaw hman: ga pa jaun nI hma aun sI Swan: ja aun D« bje o Swe bo pan: jE nE. hlamn dZa zo. Le://	The rooster crows at dawn. Together happy on the field, Hope for the successful royal drum, Let's play successful drum at drawn, let's go with Thabyay Nyo flower from Shwe Bo.

Table 1.1: Corpus of Thabyay Nyo poem

1.2.1. Analysis of the Thabyay Nyo Poem

Figure 3: Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) [38]

[38] https://lalitenterprise.com/products/eugenia-plant)

Min Thu Wun wrote the "Thabyay Nyo" poem (January 4, 1938). The first stanza /Tu. gaun: hma dE. D« bje o/ and /(N«. gaun: hma dE. D« bje o/ sentences are parallel structure.

The first stanza ending word 'Nyo' and the second stanza ending word 'Ko' are harmony.

First Stanza- သူ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို့ /Tu. gaun: hma dE. D« bje o/

ငါ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေ**ညို့**' /N«. gaun: hma dE. D« bje **o**/

Second Stanza- တို့ပြေမှာ တို့မေကမ်းပါတဲ့၊/ do. Pje hma do. me- kan: **ba** dE./

သပြေညို့ရွှေဘိုပန်းဟာက၊ / D« bje o Swe bo pan: ha ka/

လန်းလျက်ပါ**ကို့**။ ။ /Lan: hlE/ pa **ko**/

Similarly, the words /kan:/ / pan:/ / Lan:/ , / do. Pje/ / do. me/ and / hma// **ba**/ / ha/ / pa/ are harmony.

Also, the third stanza ending word 'thway' and the fourth stanza ending word 'Lay' are harmony.

Third Stanza- ဘာမလျှော့လေနဲ့၊ / ba ma SO. le nE./

လာတော့မကွဲ့ရွှေပဟိုရ်၊ / la dO. ma kwE. Swe ba ho/

လေချိုကအသွေး။ ။/Le tɕho ga « **Twe:** /

Again, the words /ba/ /la/, /SO./ / dO./, / nE./ / kwE./ and / ho/ / tɕho/ are harmony.

Fourth Stanza- လင်းကြက်အဆော်၊ / lin: tɕE/ a hsO/

ကွင်းထက်မှာတူပျော်ပျော်နဲ့၊ / kwin: thE/ hma tu pjO bjO nE./

စည်တော်ကို ရည်မျော်မှန်းကာပ၊ / sI dO go jI hmaw hman: ga pa/

ရောင်နီမှာအောင်စည်ရွှမ်းရအောင်၊/ jaun nI hma aun sI Swan: ja aun/

သပြေညို့ရွှေဘိုပန်းရယ်နဲ့၊ /D« bje o Swe bo pan: jE nE./

လှမ်းကြစို့လေး။ ။ /hlamn: dZa zo. **le:**/

The words lin: tœE/, kwin: thE/, / hsO/ / bjO/ / dO/ / hmaw/ / hman:/ /Swan:/ , /jaun nI/, / aun sI/ . /D« bje o/ /Swe bo/ / pan:/ / hlamn:/ are harmony.

Therefore, the "Thabyay Nyo" poem utilizes eloquent and harmonious language, resulting in a composition that delights the senses. This poem was used in Grade 10 Myanmar language and literature textbook (January 2020) and in Basic Education syllabus during NLD Government. Its recitation is a delightful auditory experience, with some vocalists even transforming it into a melodious song.

1.2.2. First Stanza

First Stanza	သူ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို၊ ငါ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို။ ။	/Tu. gaun: hma dE. D« bje o/ /N«. gaun: hma dE. D« bje o/	Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower (is) on his head. Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower (is) on my head

Table 1.2: First stanza of Thabyay Nyo poem

In the first stanza, the poet wrote:

'သူ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို၊

ငါ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို'

It can be translated as, "Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower (is) on his head. Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower (is) on my head." The word (ရှိ) (is) is omitted in this stanza. The words သူ့ခေါင်း "his head" and ငါ့ခေါင်း "my head" means all of Myanmar people's head wore the Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower. These verses have the same rhyme so that the sound of chatting is pleasant.

Thabyay is also known as a Eugenia sprig, symbolizing victory, a flower worn to bring victory or success in a venture (figurative).[39] Myanmar believes that the Thabyay Nyo tree is a blessed plant in its social sphere. Myanmar refers to the Aung Thabyay that means successful Eugenia.

Thus, these words Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower represents **referential, poetic, and emotive function** of Sociolinguistics and reflects Myanmar people's belief and culture. သူ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို၊ ငါ့ခေါင်းမှာ(ရှိ)တဲ့ သပြေညို' (Thabyay Nyo flower (is) on his head. Thabyay Nyo flower (is) on my head) performs as **Phatic or contact function and contextual function**. The first

[39] https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%E1%80%A1%E1%80%B1%E1%80%AC%E1%80%84%E1%80%BA%E1%80%95%E1%80%94%E1%80%BA%E1%80%B8

stanza means all Myanmar will possess a victory from the colony. Thus, it performs **metalinguistics function.**

Myanmar people believe the Thabyay Nyo flower symbolizes success in everything in their lives and wearing the flowers are a part of Myanmar's traditional culture. Min Thu Wun wrote the "Thabyay Nyo" poem for the whole Burmese nation as a good sign from the past to bring good fortune. Currently, the Myanmar people feel hurt by the junta and want to escape from their oppressions by offering the Thabyay Nyo flowers to Buddha and hoping for success.

Language Function = Referential, Poetic, phatic or contact, contextual, Emotive, metalinguistics functions

Socio Cultural points of view = Thabyay Nyo flowers carry provide a successful life and wearing the flowers are Myanmar's traditional culture

1.2.3. Second Stanza

Second Stanza	တို့ပြေမှာ တို့မေကမ်းပါတဲ့၊ သပြေညိုရွှေဘိုပန်းဟာ က၊ လန်းလျက်ပါကို။ ။	/do. Pje hma do. me-kan: ba dE. D« bje o Swe bo pan: ha ka Lan; hlE/ pa ko/	At our country, our lady gives the Thabyay Nyo from township of Shwe Bo, It's refreshing.

Table 1.3: Second stanza of Thabyay Nyo poem

In the second stanza, the poet wrote:

တို့ပြေမှာ တို့မေကမ်းပါတဲ့၊
သပြေညိုရွှေဘိုပန်းဟာက၊
လန်းလျက်ပါကို။ ။

It can be translated as, "Our country (Myanmar), our lady gives the Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) from the township of Shwe Bo, it's refreshing." Shwe Bo is a town located in the Sagaing Region of Myanmar. It is known for its historical significance as the birthplace of Alaungpaya, the founder of the Konbaung Dynasty.[40]

Shwe Bo is a successful land and the Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower from Shwe Bo is very famous, according to Myanmar history.

'တို့ပြေ တို့မေ (our country, our lady) represents the **referential, poetic,** and felt love of our country due to the **emotive** function of Sociolinguistics. တို့ပြေ (our country) means Union of

[40] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shwebo

Myanmar, တို့မေ (our lady) means Myanmar lady. 'Our country and our lady of Myanmar' performs as **phatic or contact function** and **contextual function**. 'Our lady gives the Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) from the township of Shwe Bo' reflects the tradition of giving the Thabyay Nyo from Shwe Bo. It is one of Myanmar's beliefs that the flower will bring success to everything. Thus, the 'Thabyay Nyo (Eugenia) flower from Shwe Bo' performs as **metalinguistics function**.

In Sagaing on November 24, 2023, troops came waving a red hammer-and-sickle flag as villagers lined the road to cheer. Some rushed to give them money, food, and Eugenia flowers, a symbol of victory tracing back to the conquests of long-gone Myanmar kings.[41]

Language Function = Referential, Metalinguistics, Poetic, Emotive, Phatic or contact function, and contextual function.

Socio Cultural points of view = Myanmar believes that by giving Thabyay Nyo flowers to the Army, it will bring victory to their fighting.

1.2.4. Third Stanza

Third Stanza	ဘာမလျှော့လေနဲ့၊ လာတော့မကွဲ့ရွှေပဟိုရ်၊ လေချိုကအသွေး။ ။	/ba ma SO. Le nE. la dO. ma kwE. Swe ba ho Le tɛho ga «Twe:/	Don't give up. Shwe Paho royal Drum will come, A sweet breeze blows.

Table 1.4: Third stanza of Thabyay Nyo poem

In the third stanza,

ဘာမလျှော့လေနဲ့၊
လာတော့မကွဲ့ရွှေပဟိုရ်၊
လေချိုကအသွေး။ ။

It can be translated as, "Don't give up. Shwe Paho royal Drum will come, A sweet breeze blows." The Shwe Paho royal drum is the victory drum that represents victory is coming when a sweet breeze blows. The Shwe Paho royal drum performs as **Referential function** and the verse reads harmoniously serving **poetic function**. The Shwe Paho royal drum represents victory due to **Metalinguistics and emotive function**. In December 1941, a group of Burmese independence activists founded the Burma Independence Army (BIA) with Japanese help. The Burma Independence Army led by Aung San (the father of Aung San Suu Kyi) fought in the Burma Campaign on the side of the Imperial Japanese Army.[42] At that time, the Myanmar people encouraged the Burma Independence Army by saying 'Don't give up.'

[41] https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/red-dawn-myanmars-reborn-communist-army/
[42] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tatmadaw

In the present (2021-2024) revolution, the People Defense Force are fighting for Democracy for Myanmar. When they feel depressed, the Myanmar people say, 'Don't give up,' and these words perform **Directive, contact and contextual function**.

Language Function = Referential, Metalinguistics, Poetic, Directive, contact, contextual and Emotive function

Socio Cultural points of view = Myanmar believes the Shwe Paho royal drum brings victory.

1.2.5. Fourth Stanza

Fourth Stanza	လင်းကြက်အဆော်၊ ကွင်းထက်မှာတူပျော်ပျော်နဲ့၊ စည်တော်ကို ရည်မျော်မှန်းကာပ၊ ရောင်နီမှာအောင်စည်ရွှမ်းရအောင်၊ သပြေညိုရွှေဘိုပန်းရယ်နဲ့၊ လှမ်းကြစို့လေး။ ။	/ lin: tɛE/ a hsO Kwin: thE/ hma tu pjO bjO nE. sI dO go jI hmaw hman: ga pa jaun nI hma aun sI Swan: ja aun D« bje □o Swe bo pan: jE nE. hlamn dZa zo. le://	The rooster crows at dawn. Together happy on the field, Hope for the successful royal drum, Let's play successful drum at drawn, let's go with Thabyay Nyo flower from Shwe Bo..

Table 1.5: Fourth stanza of Thabyay Nyo poem

In the fourth stanza,

လင်းကြက်အဆော်၊

ကွင်းထက်မှာတူပျော်ပျော်နဲ့၊

စည်တော်ကို ရည်မျော်မှန်းကာပ၊

It can be translated ရောင်နီမှာအောင်စည်ရွှမ်းရအောင်၊

သပြေညိုရွှေဘိုပန်းရယ်နဲ့၊

လှမ်းကြစို့လေး။ ။

as, "The rooster crows at dawn. Together happy on the field, Hope for the successful royal drum, Let's play successful drum at drawn, let's go with Thabyay Nyo flower from Shwe Bo." The rooster, the Shwe Paho royal drum, and the Thabyay Nyo flower from Shwe Bo perform **Referential function.** The metaphor of လင်းကြက်အဆော် (the rooster crows at dawn) means 'the dark days are gone and the light of freedom has come.' ကွင်းထက်မှာတူပျော်ပျော်နဲ့၊ 'Together happy on the field' acts as **contact and contextual functions**.

'ရောင်နီမှာအောင်စည်ရွမ်းရအောင်၊ (Let's play successful drum at drawn) and သပြေညို ရွှေဘိုပန်းရယ်နဲ့၊ လှမ်းကြစို့လေး (let's go with Thabyay Nyo flower from Shwe Bo) perform as **Directive, poetic, metalinguistics and emotive functions**.

In this poem, the words 'သူ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို၊ ငါ့ခေါင်းမှာတဲ့ သပြေညို' /Tu. gaun: hma dE. D« bje □o/ /N«. gaun: hma dE. D« bje □o/ သပြေညိုရွှေဘိုပန်း /D« bje □o Swe bo pan:/, ရွှေပဟိုရ် /Swe ba ho/, လင်းကြက်/ lin: tɕE// , ရောင်နီ/ jaun nI /, အောင်စည်/ -aun sI / are metaphors and symbols of 'Don't worry, Myanmar will hear the victory drum and recently Myanmar will possess an independence.[43]

Therefore, Min Thu Wun, who wrote the "Thabyay Nyo" poem believing that for the whole Burmese nation a good sign from the past can bring good fortune, created and composed a unique poem as a sign of success for Myanmar's independence.

The Thabyay Nyo campaign began on November 11, 2023 in Myanmar.

"Aung Thabyay (Eugenia leaves, the symbol of success) Public Movement" was a movement by civilians organized on November 11, known as 1111 (four 1's day). The civilians joined the organizers of the campaign using Eugenia leaves, a symbol of success, in different ways, such as wearing on the head, using as brooches, holding, offering to Buddha, putting them on the table, sticking on the walls at the front of the houses and organizing public strikes. When they were able to the civilians shared their revolutionary movement photos on social media.[44]

Operation 1027 (Burmese: ၁၀၂၇ စစ်ဆင်ရေး MLCTS: 1027, Burmese pronunciation: [tə.sʰɛ̀ ŋə.sʰɪ̰.θóʊɴ sɪʔ.sʰɪɴ.jè] is an ongoing military offensive conducted by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, a military coalition composed of three ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar: the Arakan Army (AA), Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), and Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), allied with other rebel forces in the country, against the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's ruling military junta.[45]

According to the above points, the Aung Thabyay (Victory Eugenia) flower campaign was on November 11, 2023 in Myanmar. This campaign was the welcome to the October 27, and November 7, 2023 successful spring revolutions.

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[43] Khin Min Maung (Danu Phyu), 67, 2018

[44] https://thadinn.com/en_US/aung-thabyay-eugenia-leaves-the-symbol-of-success-public-movement-will-be-organised-on-november-11/

[45] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Operation_1027

Language Function = Referential, Poetic, Contact, Contextual, Directive, metalinguistics and Emotive function

Socio Cultural points of view = Thabyay Nyo flowers are a symbol for successful life and wearing the flowers are Myanmar's traditional culture.

1.3. Findings and Results

Min Thu Wun wrote the "Thabyay Nyo" poem (January 4, 1938) ten years before Myanmar's Independence Day (January 4, 1948) and The poem's words have sociolinguistics language functions.

Sr. No	Stanza	language function	Total	Percent
1	First Stanza	(1) Referential function (2) Expressive or emotive function (3) Directive function (4) Phatic or contact function (5) Contextual function (6) Metalinguistics function (7) Poetic function. *From page 10	6 (expect of Directive function)	85%
2	Second Stanza	(1) Referential function (2) Expressive or emotive function (3) Directive function (4) Phatic or contact function (5) Contextual function (6) Metalinguistics function (7) Poetic function. *From page 11	6(expect of Directive function)	85%

3	Third Stanza	(1) Referential function (2) Expressive or emotive function (3) Directive function (4) Phatic or contact function (5) Contextual function (6) Metalinguistics function (7) Poetic function *From page 12	7	100%
4	Fourth Stanza	(1) Referential function (2) Expressive or emotive function (3) Directive function (4) Phatic or contact function (5) Contextual function (6) Metalinguistics function (7) Poetic function. *From page 14	7	100%

Table 1.6: Language function of Thabyay Nyo poem

According to Table 1.6, the "Thabyay Nyo" poem stanza (1) and (2) have 6 language functions (85%) and expect the directive function of sociolinguistics. The stanza (3) and (4) have 7 language functions (100%). Thus, "Thabyay Nyo" poem's words of stanzas perform sociolinguistics language functions, as shown in the diagram.

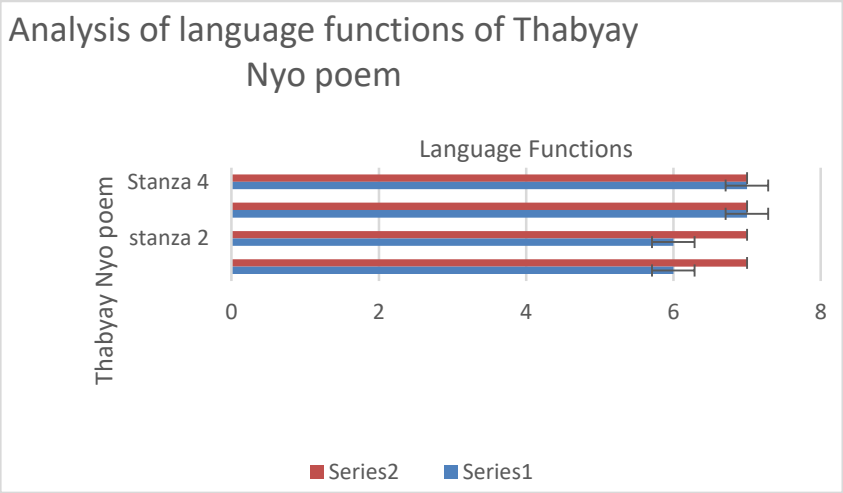

Table 1.7: Language function analysis of Thabyay Nyo poem

Findings of socio-cultural points of views between past and present:

Stanza	Socio cultural points of views	Past	Present
1	Thabyay Nyo flowers are a symbol for successful life and wearing the flowers are Myanmar's traditional culture.	Min Thu Wun wrote the "Thabyay Nyo" poem believing that for the whole Burmese nation a good sign from the past can bring good fortune.	Currently, the Myanmar people feel hurt by the junta, and want to escape from their oppressions by offering the Thabyay Nyo flowers to Buddha and by wearing the flower. There is hope victory will come.
2	Myanmar believes that by giving Thabyay Nyo flowers to the Army, it will bring victory to their fighting.	The tradition of giving the Thabyay Nyo from Shwe Bo is one of Myanmar's beliefs that it will bring success to everything.	In Sagaing on November 24, 2023, troops came waving a red hammer-and-sickle flag as villagers lined the road to cheer. Some rushed to give them money, food, and Eugenia flowers
3	Myanmar believes the Shwe Paho royal drum brings victory.	In December 1941, The Burma Independence Army led by Aung San fought in the Burma Campaign on the side of the Imperial Japanese Army. At that time, the Myanmar people encouraged the Burma Independence Army by saying 'Don't give up.'	In the present (2021-2024) revolution, the People Defense Force are fighting for Democracy for Myanmar. When they feel depressed, the Myanmar people say, 'Don't give up,'

4	Thabyay Nyo flowers are a symbol for successful life and wearing the flowers are Myanmar's traditional culture	Min Thu Wun, who wrote the "Thabyay Nyo" poem believing that for the whole Burmese nation a good sign from the past can bring good fortune, created and composed a unique poem as a sign of success for Myanmar's independence.	The Aung Thabyay (Victory Eugenia) flower campaign was on November 11, 2023 in Myanmar. This campaign was the welcome to the October 27 and November 7, 2023 successful spring revolutions.

Table 1.8: Socio cultural point of view of Thabyay Nyo poem

According to the above table, the poet Min Thu Wun wrote "Thabyay Nyo" poem (January 4, 1938) and acts as a good sign from the colonial period of Myanmar that can bring good fortune. Ten years after this poem was written, Myanmar gained independence on January 4, 1948.

Min Thu Wun's "Thabyay Nyo" poem made an impact not only on Myanmar's struggle for independence during the colonial period but also acts as aspiration to establish a federal Myanmar in the present period.

Consequently, the Thabyay flower has emerged as an emblem of optimism amidst the contemporary circumstances in Myanmar, exemplified by the Thabyay Flower Campaign launched in the nation's pursuit of democracy. This phenomenon underscores Myanmar's conviction in the auspicious association of the Thabyay flower with achievement and prosperity during the season of revolutionary uprisings.

Conclusion

This paper explored the contemporary perspectives in Myanmar through an intricate analysis of Min Thu Wun's "Thabyay Nyo" poem (1938) within the framework of Sociolinguistics. Myanmar is facing crises and the Myanmar people are trying to build the federal Democratic Myanmar by spring revolution. In summary, the impact of Min Thu Wun's "Thabyay Nyo poem" was not only on Myanmar's struggle for independence during the colonial period but also on the aspiration to establish a federal Myanmar in the present period.

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ခင်မင်၊မောင်(ဓနုဖြူ)။ (၂၀၁၈)။ *မင်းသုဝဏ်ဦးကာ*။ ရန်ကုန်၊ ဆန်းသော်တာစာအုပ်ထုတ်ဝေရေး။

မင်းသုဝဏ်။ (၁၉၄၁)။ *သပြေညိုနှင့် အခြားကဗျာများ*။ ရန်ကုန်၊ မြန်မာပြည်စာအုပ်တိုက်။

မင်းသုဝဏ်။ (၁၉၄၇)။ *သပြေညိုနှင့် အခြားကဗျာများ*၊ တတြိမ်။ ရန်ကုန်၊ သုဓမ္မဝတီစာအုပ်တိုက်။

ဝင်းမွန် (တက္ကသိုလ်-)။ (၁၉၆၈)။ ခေတ်သစ်ကဗျာမိတ်ဖွဲ့။ ရန်ကုန်၊ နှလုံးလှစာပေတိုက်။

အခြေခံပညာသင်ရိုးညွှန်းတမ်း၊ သင်ရိုးမာတိကာနှင့်ကျောင်းသုံးစာအုပ်ကော်မတီ။(၂၀၂၀)။ ဒဿမတန်းမြန်မာစာ။ မန္တလေး၊ ရတနာမိုးပုံနှိပ်တိုက်။

အောင်မြင့်ဦး၊ဒေါက်တာ။(၂၀၂၀)။ စာပေပင်လယ်ထဲက ကဗျာလှိုင်းကလေး (National Literary Award Winner Book)။ ရန်ကုန်၊ ဧရာဝဏ်စာပေတိုက်။

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Hidden Threats, New Approaches - Analyzing the Utilization of Innovative Responses to Explosive Weapons Threats in Myanmar

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Abstract

Since the February 2021 attempted coup in Myanmar, civilian casualties from landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) have skyrocketed. Recorded data shows 1,052 men, women and children killed or maimed by these weapons in 2023. While this is likely a significant undercount due to the lack of comprehensive data collection systems, it would still put Myanmar near the top of a grim list including Ukraine and Syria, with regard to civilian casualties. One of the traditional responses to this threat, in-person Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE), can also be difficult to implement in heavily conflict-affected areas where the SAC denies access to humanitarian actors. This prevents trained facilitators from reaching displaced people and others who face landmine and ERW contamination in their villages, fields, pathways, and around civilian infrastructure. Resistance forces and local humanitarian actors are thus confronted with the immense challenge of keeping people safe in a highly volatile and contested environment. Junta forces prevent even life-saving interventions, and in some cases specifically target both the individuals and entities providing aid and the physical infrastructure, such as prosthetic limb clinics, which addresses the impacts of explosive ordnance contamination.

How then, do humanitarian actors address these threats in such a contested environment? This paper explores the diverse and innovative ways in which humanitarian mine action operators, local civil society and media, and resistance forces have delivered risk education and victim assistance services to affected communities through non-traditional mediums, such as the use of Facebook and its targeted advertising functionality, interactive mobile phone applications, online courses, radio, as well as mobile prosthetic clinics and other medical-focused support, to mitigate this threat. It highlights the attempts to leverage key tools, actors and opportunities in the information space to deliver potentially life-saving messaging to civilians and indicates a number of ways in which lessons learned could inform future efforts, beyond explosive weapons threats.

Keywords: Media, Protection, Landmines, Conflict

1. Introduction[46]

Since the February 2021 attempted coup in Myanmar, civilian casualties from landmines and other explosive remnants of war (ERW) have skyrocketed. Recorded data shows 1,052 men, women and children killed or maimed by these weapons in 2023. While this is likely a significant undercount due to the lack of comprehensive data collection systems, it would still put Myanmar near the top of a grim list including Ukraine and Syria, in regard to civilian casualties. One of the traditional responses to this threat, in-person Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE), can also be difficult to implement in heavily conflict-affected areas where the SAC denies access to humanitarian actors. This prevents trained facilitators from reaching displaced people and others who face landmine and ERW contamination in their villages, fields, pathways, and around civilian infrastructure. Resistance forces and local humanitarian actors are thus confronted with the immense challenge of keeping people safe in a highly volatile and contested environment. Junta forces prevent even life-saving interventions, and in some cases specifically target both the individuals and entities providing aid and the physical infrastructure, such as prosthetic limb clinics, which addresses the impacts of explosive ordnance contamination.

How then, do humanitarian actors address these threats in such a contested environment? This paper explores the diverse and innovative ways in which humanitarian mine action operators, local civil society and media, and resistance forces have delivered risk education to affected communities through non-traditional mediums, such as the use of Facebook and its targeted advertising functionality, interactive mobile phone applications, online courses, radio and others, to mitigate this threat. It highlights the attempts to leverage key tools, actors and opportunities in the information space to deliver potentially life-saving messaging to civilians and indicates a number of ways in which lessons learned could inform future efforts, beyond explosive ordnance threats.

2. Context Intro

2.1. Background, Context of Landmines and Unexploded Ordnance

Landmines are explosive weapons, which can be concealed below or above ground, and are specifically designed to kill or maim people, or in the case of anti-vehicle mines, disable or destroy vehicles. Landmines can be activated in a number of different ways; most commonly activated by pressure from above, via a tripwire, or a radio or mobile phone signal. Most landmines are 'victim activated,' meaning it is the victim who triggers the detonation of the mine through some action, such as stepping on a mine or walking through a tripwire. As victim activated mines are not targeting a specific individual or vehicle, they can remain dormant for years or even decades, killing or injuring those who activate it far after it has been laid. Finding and removing them can be challenging, as they can be made from various materials, such as

[46] This paper was presented at the 4th International Conference on Burma/Myanmar Studies, at Chiang Mai University, in Chiang Mai, Thailand on 2nd August, 2024, as part of a panel titled 'Resistance & Resilience: Civil Society and Political Dynamics in Myanmar'.

plastic, wood, or metal, and are often concealed or camouflaged, so as to make detection difficult.[47]

Unexploded ordnance, or UXO, are explosive munitions, such as rockets, bombs, mortars, fuses, grenades, or artillery rounds, which have been fired, launched, dropped from an aircraft, or thrown, but have not detonated as they were designed to do. These unexploded munitions are by nature often extremely unstable; even light handling or touch can detonate them. UXO will often be found in areas where there have been battles or skirmishes and like landmines can lay dormant for years, remaining an ever-present threat to civilians who live in or travel through the affected area.[48] Explosive Remnants of War (ERW) refers to explosive munitions which are left behind in a conflict area and include both UXO and abandoned explosive ordnance (AXO), which are munitions that have not been fired or dropped but are left in an area. This paper will use both terms.

The usage of anti-personnel landmines emerged initially as a tool to protect larger anti-vehicle landmines and prevent their disarmament by opposing forces.[49] This later expanded to their use as a defensive weapon to protect strategically key areas such as bases and camps as well as infrastructure such as bridges, airports or roads. Additionally, they were used as an area denial weapon to restrict an enemy's movement to specific areas. Later, landmines became a common tool in both conventional warfare and unconventional conflicts, where landmines could be deployed to target both combatants and civilians alike; the latter in order to terrorize populations, deny them access to land, and restrict their movement. Two key characteristics of landmines are worth noting. The first is one of the most common forms of landmine, the anti-personnel blast mine,[50] and is not specifically designed to kill its victim but rather seriously maim them. The perverse logic underpinning this construction is that in a conflict situation, a wounded combatant requires more resources and manpower to support them. Thus, by injuring a soldier with a landmine, more soldiers will be required to carry them, care for them, and remove them from the battlefield, taking their attention away from actual combat. If the mine simply killed, this would not be the case. The second is that factory-produced anti-personnel landmines, due to their materials and robust construction, can remain dormant but active for years or even decades after they have been placed. This means that civilians in a former conflict zone can face being maimed or killed decades after fighting has ceased.

Globally, landmine and UXO contamination remains a serious problem for dozens of countries, although the production and use of landmines has slowed in recent years. Historically, over 50 countries have produced landmines at one point, but today, the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) estimates that production may only be occurring in four countries; India, Myanmar, Pakistan and South Korea.[51] Such a reduction can be partly contributed to extensive

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[47] See UNMAS Handbook, available at: https://unmas.org/sites/default/files/handbook_english.pdf
[48] Ibid.
[49] For more information on this, see 'A History of Landmines' by the International Campaign to Ban Landmines (ICBL) - http://www.icbl.org/en-gb/problem/a-history-of-landmines.aspx
[50] See UNMAS Handbook section 1.1.1.1 for detailed description.
[51] See 2019 ICBL Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitoring Report for Burma/Myanmar.

advocacy efforts by the ICBL and others. These efforts led to the adoption of the 1997 Mine Ban Treaty (sometimes referred to as the Ottawa Convention), which entered into force in March 1999.[52] The treaty not only prohibits production, use, and stockpiling of antipersonnel mines but also requires the implementation of mine risk education and victim assistance programs. While over 80% of the world's states have signed and ratified the treaty, China, Russia, the United States, Myanmar, and others, still have yet to do so. While the treaty has led to the reduced production and use of landmines, they still remain a threat in many countries, where they lie dormant from conflicts decades ago, have been recently planted either by state militaries not party to the treaty, or used by non-state armed groups who cannot sign international treaties.[53]

2.2. Background and Context of Landmine and UXO Threat in Myanmar

It is difficult to overstate the scale and persistence of the landmine and UXO threat in Myanmar. Since its independence from Britain, decades of internal conflict have left vast swaths of the country's border areas littered with unexploded rockets, mortars, artillery shells, aircraft bombs, and grenades. Extensive use of anti-personnel blast and fragmentation mines by the national military, known as the Tatmadaw, IEDs placed by non-state armed groups, and extensive UXO contamination, combined with poor mapping and non-existent clearance programs, means civilians are regularly killed and maimed by mines and UXO. Myanmar has not signed the Mine Ban Treaty and is likely one of only four nations on earth still actively producing landmines, through its 'Ka Pa Sa' (Myanmar Defence Products Industries) factories in West Bago Region. Since the February 2021 attempted coup, conflict has increased significantly across the country, so new contamination is regularly added to previously contaminated areas across the Southeast and in Shan, Kachin and Rakhine states. With fighting in new areas, such as Chin State, Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay region, civilians who were previously not cognizant of this issue now face significant threat. Furthermore, prior to the coup, despite the presence of multiple humanitarian mine action focused NGOs[54], no humanitarian clearance of explosive threats occurred. This trend continued following the coup, although ad hoc localized efforts have occurred, which will be explored further here.[55]

The impact on civilians in Myanmar of landmine and UXO contamination is staggering. Between 2015 and 2020, UNICEF recorded over 1,000 civilian casualties from landmines or

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[52] The full name of the treaty is "the Convention on the Prohibition of the Use, Stockpiling, Production and Transfer of Anti-Personnel Mines and on Their Destruction." For full text of the treaty see: https://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B8954/(httpAssets)/8DF9CC31A4CA8B32C12571C7002E3F3E/$file/APLC+English.pdf

[53] While non-state armed groups cannot be party to the Mine Ban Treaty, there are alternatives, such as the Geneva Call Deeds of Commitment – for more information see: https://www.genevacall.org/how-we-work/

[54] Prior to the coup in Myanmar, HALO Trust, NPA, MAG, Humanity & Inclusion, DCA, and DRC-HDP actively worked on risk education, victim assistance, and survey-related projects; clearance and stockpile destruction were prohibited.

[55] See the 2022 ICBL Landmine and Cluster Munitions Monitoring Report for Burma/Myanmar.

UXO, while from 2021 and 2024, nearly 3,000 civilians were killed and injured, both most certainly are significant undercounts.[56] Of these recorded casualties, each year between 30-45% are women and children.[57]

In addition to killing and causing horrific injuries to civilians, landmines and ERW also impact civilians in a number of other ways. Primarily, landmines and ERW deny access to land, as uncertainty around the explosive risks mean people are reluctant to travel over or utilize land with suspected contamination. In a country where a significant percentage of the population engage in agriculture, this can have a devastating effect on livelihoods and food security.[58] Further, more than one million refugees from Myanmar currently live in displacement sites in Bangladesh and Thailand. Their areas of origin in Rakhine State and the southeast of Myanmar are extensively contaminated and therefore any durable solutions addressing displacement must take this contamination into account and eventually remove it.

3. Post-coup Contamination

While Myanmar faced extensive contamination prior to the coup, this event and subsequent conflict dynamics, introduced a number of new elements to the contamination context. These new elements largely consisted of a much larger scale of use, by both SAC and resistance forces, a wider geographic dispersion in terms of contamination, especially into new areas, and the introduction of new weapons, such as aircraft bombs, IEDs, and cluster munitions.

According to the Landmine and Cluster munition monitor report for Myanmar in 2023, there has been extensive use of antipersonnel landmines by SAC troops and various other armed actors, in nearly every part of the country. Contamination around key infrastructure such as mobile phone towers, extractive enterprises, and energy pipelines by SAC troops has increased since they seized power in February 2021. The report also indicated that instead of acquiring landmines from the clandestine arms market or removing them from minefields for re-use, non-state armed groups continued to produce various types of improvised mines in 2022-2023. These included improvised blast and fragmentation antipersonnel mines that are victim-activated, improvised antipersonnel landmines, claymore-type directional fragmentation mines, anti-vehicle mines, and anti-personnel mines equipped with anti-handling devices.

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[56] While surveillance systems have improved in recent years, it is still likely that civilians in remote areas of Shan, Kachin and Rakhine states are injured or killed by landmines or ERW, and this information is never reported to higher authorities or media. This is due to geographic remoteness, and poor internet connectivity. While this has improved greatly in recent years, the coup has added new elements; mainly a reduction in communication ability, and contamination in new areas, where surveillance is even less robust. It also highlights how incomplete information on landmine/ERW casualties is likely to be prior to 2012 (when HMA INGOs could begin systematically collecting data inside Myanmar). We will never know the true extent of the impact of landmines/ERW on civilians in Myanmar.

[57] Statistics on casualties are regularly published by UNICEF and the Mine Risk Working Group; for the latest data see: https://themimu.info/sector/mine-action.

[58] For a detailed review of how communities are impacted by ERW, see the 2012 KHRG report 'Uncertain Ground', available here: https://khrg.org/sites/khrg.org/files/khrg1201.pdf.

News of seizing or capturing antipersonnel mines by resistance groups from SAC forces are frequently shared on social media, often by the resistance forces themselves. These seizures appear to most commonly include at least five types of antipersonnel landmine: MM1, MM2, MM3, MM5 and MM6 variants, which are produced by the state-owned enterprise Myanmar Defense Products Industries, known as Ka Pa Sa.[59] In addition to captured and repurposed weapons, resistance forces, in particular People's Defence Forces (PDFs), have developed a relatively sophisticated IED capacity. They deploy these weapons to target SAC vehicles and personnel throughout the country, prompting various response strategies from the SAC.[60]

Cluster munitions, which house smaller sub-munitions within a larger bomb casing, are then dispersed over target areas. Myanmar was not known to have produced them until reports and evidence emerged in 2023 indicating that it may have manufactured a domestic cluster bomb, and that since 2021 have been used by the Myanmar Air Force in several attacks around the country. Resistance forces and community-based groups have identified possible uses of these weapons in Kawareik and Myawaddy in Karen areas, Pekon and Demoso townships in the Karenni/Southern Shan theatre, and Mindat in Chin State. The Landmine Monitor reported receiving photos of cluster bomb remnants from aerial attacks, which resulted in 7 fatalities and 33 injuries in verified cases. The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) also published photographs of remnants from a suspected domestically-produced cluster bomb used in an April 2022 attack in the P'Loo village tract of Myawaddy Township, Kayin state, near the border with Thailand.[61]

Lastly, it is important to highlight how contamination in 'new' areas has increased significantly. Prior to the coup, most landmine and UXO casualties occurred in the Southeast (Karen & Karenni areas), Shan and Kachin states in the Northeast, and more recently, in Rakhine State, since the emergence of the Arakan Army. Since the coup, new areas such as Sagaing and Magwe regions and Chin State have been hugely impacted. According to the Landmine and ERW Incident Information Report for 2023 released by UNICEF Myanmar, there were a total of 1,052 victims from 599 incidents over the course of the year. Of this figure, 35% of the total casualties occurred in Sagaing Region alone. This is a staggering figure, considering that prior to the coup there were usually zero casualties in this area annually.[62] In

[59] Landmine Monitor Report. (2023). https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Assessment_Landmine_Monitor_Report_Dec2023_ENG.pdf.

[60] Extensive use of IED use by PDFs in the Dry Zone has led to various strategies by the SAC to disrupt their use, including the use of jamming technologies; see: https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmars-military-increasing-use-of-signal-jammers-to-foil-attacks-by-anti-regime-guerrillas/

[61] Landmine Monitor Report. (2023). Local community groups also reported photographic evidence to the authors of attacks in Karen areas of Southeast Myanmar; it appears these cluster bombs are repurposed mortar shells packed in casing.

[62] For example, the Landmine Monitor Report for Myanmar (2017) only mentions suspected hazardous areas in one township in Sagaing Region (Indaw) and none in Magwe; see:

2022 and 2023, casualties were also recorded in areas like Mandalay and Yangon regions, where mine and UXO contamination was previously unheard of. Although comprehensive survey data is not available due to the current context, it is likely that such significant casualty figures are due to a combination of increased use by SAC forces and a total lack of previous exposure to the threat among the civilian population, meaning awareness levels of risks and mitigation measures would be extremely limited.

4. Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA) Background

While the challenge facing Myanmar, or any country impacted by landmine/UXO contamination, is grave, there are various strategies to address the threat. Globally, Humanitarian Mine Action (HMA), which is the overall strategy for dealing with explosive threats from a humanitarian perspective, is defined by the United Nations as having five pillars. These pillars include 1) Explosive ordnance risk education (EORE), 2) Victim assistance (VA), 3) Advocacy, 4) Stockpile Destruction and 5) Clearance.[63] The International Mine Action Standards (IMAS) provide a set of minimum standards from which contextually relevant, usually national-level standards can be developed and implemented. This is to ensure that activities under the five pillars are carried out safely and efficiently and provide a standardized approach for humanitarian mine action organizations to follow.[64] The following section will primarily focus on one of the pillars, EORE, but also highlight key interventions within two others, victim assistance and clearance. Specifically, the following sections will analyze how various stakeholders in the post-coup landscape have employed strategies and tools to respond to the increasing threat of landmines and UXO.

5. Post-coup Responses in Myanmar

5.1. Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE)

Explosive ordnance risk education (EORE) refers to activities that seek to reduce the risk of injury from mines/ERW by raising awareness and promoting behavior change through activities, such as public information dissemination, education and training, and community mine action liaison.[65] With guidance from IMAS, EORE organizations and facilitators must adhere to the fundamental principles of EORE. These include delivery of factually correct information, emphasizing what people can do to stay safe – information and strategies that can prevent accidents rather than focusing solely on the dangers of mines/UXOs. It involves tailoring key messages with the right quantity and choice of information, challenging myths

https://www.themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Assessment_Landmine_Monitor_Report_2017_ENG.pdf

[63] For more information on the five pillars, please see: https://www.unmas.org/en/5-pillars-of-mine-action

[64]For more information and the full list of IMAS available, please see:
https://www.mineactionstandards.org/about-imas/

[65]For the full IMAS document on EORE, please see:
https://www.mineactionstandards.org/standards/12-10/

where necessary, and involving the audience in the strategy making process in the implementation of risk education activities. There is a variety of communication channels and techniques that can be used in information sharing of key safety messages to the affected communities, depending on culture and context: person-to-person or interpersonal communication, small media, traditional media and mass media.

Some international operators directly conduct the risk education activities in their target locations for IDPs, returnees, and conflict-affected communities, including children. However, one of the first steps to reaching more community members in remote and conflict-affected areas and addressing access constraints is to build and strengthen the EORE local resources, such as humanitarian front line workers, civil society organizations, community-based organizations and community volunteers. To this end, some international organizations provide standardized training of trainers for implementing local partners and community volunteers.

In Myanmar, delivery of explosive ordnance risk education with the standardized EORE IEC toolkit by international mine action operators was officially approved by the Department of Social Welfare under the Ministry of Social welfare, Relief and Resettlement of Myanmar government, in 2015. While EORE activities took place prior to this, these were generally ad-hoc and utilized bespoke tools developed by individual facilitators. From 2012, the Mine Risk Working Group (MRWG) coordinated the process of standardizing the risk education tools. The MRWG was the coordinating body that brought together various stakeholders involved in mine action, including government departments, INGOs and local NGOs, UN agencies, and other relevant authorities and actors. It aims to enhance the coordination and collaboration among key stakeholders and to address the impact of explosive ordnances before the military coup.[66]

Traditionally, EORE was facilitated through face-to-face sessions and utilized printed materials, which a facilitator could show to the audience. Following the coup, this modality become increasingly challenging, due to security risks around carrying such materials. Further, the environment became particularly challenging for international operators who had not extended their letter of agreements (LoA) or Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the SAC's Department of Rehabilitation, which is the focal department for liaison and is responsible for providing approval for submitted workplans and travel authorizations for implementation of mine action related activities in the country after February 2021. As a result, organizations that do not have valid organization registration, LoA or MoU with the government, must conduct activities in a low-profile manner. Random and thorough security checks, arbitrary arrests and detentions by SAC's troops at many checkpoints have worsened, hindering the ability of organizations to conduct awareness sessions with visual materials.

The announcement that the SAC would begin enforcing the military conscription law and forced recruitments by other armed actors further complicated the movement of EORE

[66] The MRWG met regularly at the Union-level in Naypyitaw, and at the State/Region level. For an example of a description of an MRWG meeting, please see: https://www.myanmaritv.com/news/mine-risks-awareness-national-mine-risk-working-group-meeting-nay-pyi-taw

facilitators in the continuation of EORE delivery. It simply was too risky for them to travel in some areas. There have also been reports of SAC troops targeting humanitarian workers throughout the country. As a result, adding IEC materials, which portray explosive weapons into this mix, could further threaten EORE facilitators.[67] Meanwhile, the landscape of EORE delivery in areas controlled by local people's defense forces, the NUGs administrative apparatus, or ethnic armed groups in the northwest or southeast of Myanmar, for example, differs from those by SAC. These actors are generally more receptive to allowing or conducting EORE awareness sessions, supporting the mobilization of communities, and handling administrative and logistics matters. A staff member from one local CSO, based in the northwest, shared her experience of this, stating

> *In our operation areas, we usually have to inform the township level administrative body (referring to the 'Pa-Aa-Pha' aka People Administration Teams) for getting prior approval for implementing activities in target villages in their controlled areas. They welcome our projects and are quite supportive in our implementation in reaching out to respective village level committees and mobilization of people as needed.*

According to the figures released by Mine Action Area of Responsibility (AoR), it reported that more than 420,000 people were reached by risk education messages in 2022 in Myanmar. This is an increase from the 194,530 recipients reached in 2021 and 106,875 in 2020, which has been partly facilitated by the use of new delivery methods, including social media platforms and introduction of a risk education mobile application, despite ongoing operational challenges.[68] Due to the sharp rise in the number of casualties, particularly in the southeast and northwest of the country, increased efforts by the Inter-Cluster Coordination Group have also been observed in mainstreaming risk education activities across different clusters.

There are also opportunities to promote and strengthen digital EORE methods, leveraging the increased use of social media platforms by the public. These opportunities remain available and are currently initiated by HMA operators in the country. According to statistics published by Digital Myanmar Report in January 2024, Myanmar has a total population of 54.78 million. The data reveals that there are 64.28 million cellular mobile connections in the country, meaning there are more SIM cards than people in the country. Additionally, 24.11 million individuals, or 44% of total population, are internet users, and 18.50 million have social media accounts.[69]

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[67] For one example of this phenomenon, please see "Our health workers are working in fear; After Myanmar's military coup, one year of targeted violence against health care." Physicians for Human Rights (January 2022), accessible at: https://phr.org/our-work/resources/one-year-anniversary-of-the-myanmar-coup-detat/

[68] For more information please see: Landmine Monitor Report. (2023). https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Assessment_Landmine_Monitor_Report_Dec2023_ENG.pdf

[69] Digital Myanmar Report January. (2024). https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-myanmar#:~:text=The%20state%20of%20digital%20in%20Myanmar%20in%202024&text=There%20were%2024.11%20million%20internet,percent%20of%20the%20total%20population.

Regarding the use of social media platforms, various alternative digital methods are being explored and utilized by some international and national actors. These methods are chosen based on the target audience, type of threats, availability of digital devices, internet accessibility, and the specific context of the target locations. Since the coup, digital EORE campaigns are increasingly conducted on widely used social media platforms and messenger channels such as Facebook/Meta, YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, Viber, Telegram, LinkedIn, Twitter, Signal and others. The social media platforms are bringing opportunities to actors to engage directly with users, who are also the target audience, to reach a greater number of people, easily scale and adapt to changing contexts, and spend less money compared to in-person related project activities. For example, the Explosive Ordnance Risk Education in Myanmar Facebook page has shared key information to contaminated areas through Facebook's targeted advertising functionality, which allows posts to be targeted at users within highly specific geographic areas.[70]

Approaching trusted and credible media outlets is also crucial for influencing people's behaviors, as messages conveyed through these channels are more likely to be taken seriously and accepted by the audience. Given the evidence that media outlets have extensive audience reach, some HMA actors have established their relationship and partnership with some local media outlets from conflict-affected areas in dissemination of safety messages around the risks posed by landmines and other explosive ordnance.[71]

This allows them to reach a large and diverse range of audiences on social media platforms through analyzing the various demographic data such as age, gender, locations and interests, and ensure that the messages are tailored and delivered to the right audience. Media outlets can offer varieties of multimedia functionalities or contexts including videos, texts, images, audio, etc. to create more impactful and persuasive messages. It could be observed that risk education messages delivered through coordinated campaigns by many media outlets at the same time using the multimedia contents are often more engaging, memorable and compelling ones.

Creating consistent messages informing of the risks across multiple platforms increases the likelihood of retention and reinforces the positive behavior change by the audience when they come across explosive ordnance. Particularly in Myanmar, social media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and influencing behaviors. Ads of specific posts are pinned and targeted with key safety messages and offer interactive engagement, such as discussions, feedback, comments, sharing posts. Overall, this enhances the intended reach and makes campaigns more impactful. Communicating EORE messages before, during and after emergencies or extreme weather events, using targeted Facebook ads, like those conducted for Cyclone Mocha in the Northwest region of the country, had also proven to be an effective method for delivering important, urgent or time-sensitive messages.

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[70] To view this page, please see: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100068836405510

[71] For an example of a post related to landmine risk awareness by local media, please see here: https://fb.watch/t16zqFEWz_/

Conversely, there are a number of challenges in utilizing social media as a dissemination tool. Primarily, many areas are facing internet shutdowns, which make access tools like Facebook or TikTok extremely difficult.[72] What other methods are then employed? One strategy is using local radio stations (or portable radio devices) for dissemination of tailored public service announcements run by local media outlets on explosive ordnance risk education. This can be an accessible medium not requiring internet access and can be used to reach those conflict-affected people in remote areas. This includes ethnic and religious minority groups who may not have consistent access to internet but are at most risk of frequent displacements/movements due to intensive fighting and offensive military raids, particularly in the Southeast and Northwest regions of the country. For example, Karen Information Center (KIC), a local media group in the southeast of Myanmar, regularly broadcasts in S'gaw Karen language and includes landmine/UXO awareness PSAs as part of its coverage. Many other local radio stations do the same in their areas.[73] Local communities often trust in local radio stations and see them as a reliable source of information, as they are also part of the community and understand local issues and concerns. However, it is difficult to measure the exact number of audience reached by radio programs, and estimates must rely on agreed-upon sampling ratios within their coverage areas. Analysis on the effectiveness of local radio stations will still need to be explored and recorded.

Regarding the use of various innovative channels to reach a diverse target audience, it has been observed that the online self-learning course on EORE, which offers a certificate upon completion, is provided by e-learning university/digital learning platforms established by the generation of digital knowledge and CDMers students, in cooperation and consultation with the country-based international mine action actor.[74] The course is developed in an interactive way with user-friendly functions together with videos, photos, articles, quizzes, which can be easily accessed and completed via mobile devices both in Android and IOS versions without any limitations for those students and youths living in areas with high levels of explosive ordnance threats in the midst of active armed conflicts. The course is intended to equip them with knowledge about safe and unsafe behaviors and encourage them to pass on these safety messages to their surrounding communities.

Various stakeholders have also been using messaging applications to spread awareness. UNICEF utilizes a Viber channel called 'Thuta Talk' (သုတစကားဝိုင်း) to disseminate important and timely information to mothers, caregivers, and the most vulnerable communities in Myanmar. This platform is also used for dissemination of key information about landmine/UXO risks.[75] Using an interactive approach, this channel helps families stay safe and

[72] For more information on this, please see: https://www.accessnow.org/press-release/myanmar-keepiton-internet-shutdowns-2023-en/

[73] For more information see the Radio Karen website, run by KIC: https://radiokaren.org/schedule/

[74] Spring University: https://sumlearn.springuniversitymm.com/

[75] For more information on the Thuta Talk Viber channel, administered by Unicef, please see: https://www.unicef.org/myanmar/my/%E1%80%9E%E1%80%AF%E1%80%90%E1%80%85%E1%80%80%E1%80%AC%E1%80%B8%E1%80%9D%E1%80%AD%E1%80%AF%E1%80%84%E1%80%BA%E1%80%B8

healthy through questions and quizzes, reaching around 36,637 subscribers, who also may forward content to friends and family members. In promoting awareness of the risks around explosive ordnance, UNICEF also uses U-Report, a digital community and innovative social messaging tool for young people, by young people. This platform allows them to raise their voices and share opinions on topics that matter to them.[76]

In addition to the above social media platforms, in 2018 an interactive Mine Risk Education/Explosive Ordnance Risk Education mobile phone application in Burmese language for iOS and Android platforms was developed to allow the dissemination of messages anywhere the app is used as well as support in-person EORE facilitation.[77] Originally developed in Burmese, it was later updated to include Jingphaw, Shan, S'gaw Karen and Ta'ang languages, focusing on the languages used in the most heavily contaminated areas at the time. At the time, this application was one of the first of its kind developed globally, specifically for EORE dissemination, in local languages. While the active user-base of the app is limited in terms of large-scale utilization, it can be a powerful tool for facilitators, especially when they are not able to carry traditional materials such as flip charts, posters, flyers and other physical materials, due to security reasons.

5.2. Victim Assistance (VA)

Victim assistance refers to the comprehensive support provided to individuals, families and communities affected by landmines and UXO. The process also aims to ensure the rights of mine victims are respected, ensure that they have access to emergency medical care, physical, psychological and socio-economic rehabilitation services and opportunities, and to address their needs in short-term, medium-term and long-term. A range of activities such as emergency and continuing medical care, physical rehabilitation, psychosocial support, economic and social inclusion, capacity building, laws and policies, data collection and analyzing, all fall within the purview of victim assistance and need to be conducted to help the victims recover, reintegrate into society, and lead fulfilling lives with the support of families and surrounding communities.[78] While enhancing the accessibility and quality of support for victims, it is also important to promote inclusion and disability awareness, uphold the rights of persons with disabilities (PwD), and adapt the physical environment with reasonable accommodation and universal designs in the affected communities.

Given the current political and conflict landscape, it is not feasible for international mine action operators to conduct clearance or humanitarian demining in many affected areas. While EORE is crucial, it alone cannot guarantee the safety of affected people due to the numerous factors that influence behavior change and adhere safe practices. Indiscriminate artillery shelling and airstrike on civilian infrastructures and areas are major threats contributing to the rising number

[76] For more information on the U-Report tool, please see: https://ureport.in/
[77] For more information or to download the application for iOS or Android, see: https://mreapp.org/
[78] To review the full IMAS guideline on victim assistance, please see: https://www.mineactionstandards.org/standards/13-10/

of victims, meaning that victim assistance structures and interventions are critical in the current time period in Myanmar.

In the years since the coup, the social protection system for persons with disabilities, including mine victims (PWD), is managed and provided for by state and government bodies and has deteriorated significantly on improving the quality of life. The collapse of administrative structures and the lack of technical support from international and national experts have prevented the successful strengthening of the national management and support bodies. Even before the coup, Myanmar lacked a centralized and national database for systematically collecting detailed information on victims, including the type, the severity of injuries, and the assistance they have received. This absence hindered the ability to fully understand the scope of the issue, tailor support services effectively, and inform policy makers in decision-making process to develop and implement effective victim assistance policies and strategies with evidence-based insights.

One intervention, which has been effectively employed since the coup in terms of VA, has been the disbursement of emergency cash support to victims. This covers transport and medical treatment costs immediately after an incident and has been crucial in saving lives. In conflict-affected areas of Myanmar, the health infrastructure has historically been poor, with transport being difficult and expensive, due to the need to travel long distances to access care. Historically, this has been a challenge in ensuring victims of landmines or UXO to receive proper care. They may not be able to afford the costs to travel and pay for care. A cash intervention addresses this and allows an individual to cover initial costs, whether that be in SAC-run health facilities or in mobile or static health clinics run by resistance forces. These cash infusions are generally administered by local civil society or key community volunteers, people who have access to conflict-affected areas and are trusted by local community members.

One landmine survivor from Sagaing Region, who spoke with these authors, stated:

> *I lost my right leg, from above the knee, due to damage to the main artery on 1st January 2024, after undergoing a major operation. The incident was caused by 60 mm mortar round which the SAC had fired near my village. We have been facing offensive military raids by SAC troops every 4 or 5 months. I was hospitalized at the local clinic immediately after the incident, and I survived thanks to the first aid provided by a female volunteer before I could reach the clinic, which took many hours. I'm now in the recovery process, undergoing physical rehabilitation exercises. I want to express my gratitude to those who supported me with 500,000 MMK for my medical expenses. Though the amount is not huge, it has been really useful for our family during these difficult times as we have no income amid the ongoing conflict.*[79]

These cash infusions have proven critical in addressing a rapidly growing need for support, especially where many of the victims have few resources available to cover costs due to the ongoing conflict.

[79] Interview with the authors, February 2024.

With regard to physical rehabilitation, it is also crucial for victims of explosive weapons as it not only restores their physical abilities but also plays a significant role in their psychological well-being, social integration, and overall quality of life. Currently, some international agencies and local organizations provide prosthetic legs, repair and maintenance, and basic physical rehabilitation support to survivors, through shared cost programs or providing services free of charge. For example, in Hpa-an, Kayin State, the ICRC has been running a rehabilitation center for more than 20 years, providing prosthetic and rehab services to those in Southeast Myanmar. For those who are unable or unwilling to access SAC-controlled Hpa-an, the health department of the KNU, the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW), also runs a number of clinics in their areas.[80] Post-coup, many of these efforts have been disrupted in places like Sagaing and Magwe, where a lack of resources on prosthetics and rehab have previously existed. However, there are some organizations beginning to setup and operate mobile prosthetic workshops in high-risk areas such as Kayin, Kayah, Rakhine, Shan, Sagaing, as well is in the border-areas of neighboring countries, staffed by trained local personnel who provide customized prosthetic legs to victims free of charge. 3D printing technology has also been employed in some of these contexts, opening up new opportunities to expand capacity to support victims, which may not have been previously possible.[81]

The capacity building programs to equip community-based volunteers with theoretical and practical knowledge of basic rehabilitation, prosthetic leg repair and referral mechanisms are also increasing. Meanwhile, the movements of mobile teams by large service providers to support victims in remote and hard-to-reach areas are restricted amid ongoing armed conflicts. Training local people from locally based organizations is the most sustainable way to deliver continuous support to victims. Therefore, a number of mine action actors are training frontline humanitarian workers and responders in basic first aid and trauma care techniques, in addition to their standardized EORE Training of Trainers (ToT).[82] In areas controlled by ethnic armed groups or local defense forces, the deployment of mobile health units and the establishment of new static clinics, in some cases partly staffed by CDM-doctors and nurses, have also been critical in supporting victims of explosive weapons.[83]

Additionally, a limited number of organizations also implement livelihood support or income-generating activities for mine victims and their families, aimed at fostering their economic

[80] For more on the ICRC clinic in Hpa-an, please see: https://www.icrc.org/en/document/myanmar-hpa-orthopaedic-rehabilitation-centre-marks-20-years; for more on one of the KDHW clinics, please see: https://karennews.org/2016/06/prosthetic-workshop-center-opens-in-hlaingbwe-township/

[81] For more on the use of 3D printing of prosthetics in post-coup Myanmar, please see: https://www.3dnatives.com/en/3d-printing-revolutionizes-prosthetic-care-for-amputees-myanmar-border-180420246/

[82] Based on the author's engagement with mine action operators, at least six organizations are actively training local first responders on these topics, throughout Myanmar.

[83] For a detailed description of how CDM medical personnel are bringing their capacity and experience to resistance-run facilities, please see: https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-cdm-doctor-performing-brain-surgery-amid-the-bullets/

recovery and overall well-being. Some organizations provide capacity-building and vocational trainings, such as handicrafts, agricultural techniques, and starting small businesses, with the purpose of fostering resilience of victims by equipping them with skills and resources to recover and rebuild their lives. The typical grant sizes provided by organizations in the country range between 500,000–1,500,000 MMK and are meant to help a survivor start their own businesses or work in a trade. However, funding for long-term livelihood support is scarce, as a significant portion of the already meager resources available is prioritized for emergency life-saving interventions.[84]

Beyond physical injuries caused by explosive weapons, there is a component related to mental health as well, due to the traumatic nature of a landmine or UXO incident. Regarding mental health support activities, some initiatives have started on training victims on psychosocial support and psychological first aid, with the intention of supporting their peers in the established victim assistance center and the places where they are residing. This kind of peer-to-peer mental health support programs where survivors can mentor and support new victims can also foster a sense of community and mutual assistance, which can be critical in an active-conflict setting. While virtual support programs are not possible yet to establish on a large-scale, with internet accessibility problems in many areas, physical spaces where victims can share their experiences with each other in a safe environment are critical, but the lack of mental health care professionals means they are few and far between.[85]

5.3. Clearance

Put simply, clearance refers to the process by which explosive threats are removed or cleared from an impacted area, thus rendering it safe for civilians to use. There is an important distinction here. 'Humanitarian clearance' is a specific process which is more comprehensive than others. For example, military-focused clearance may only clear land required to accomplish a specific military objective like moving troops from point A to point B. Prior to the February 2021 attempted coup, no formal humanitarian clearance of explosive threats had taken place in Myanmar. Although the mine action sector working with the Department of Social Welfare, along with the Tatmadaw, had showed some progress in regards to moving beyond just EORE & VA by 2019, this never resulted in formal permission to conduct clearance activities. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent coup prevented any further progress.[86] Historically, the Tatmadaw had viewed clearance as their sole purview, and as such, a lack of technical expertise or equipment was present in Myanmar when the coup occurred. In many ways, what developed following the coup was a nightmare scenario in regards to contamination. There was no formal clearance capacity, experience or equipment in country, rapidly increasing contamination in both scale & breadth, large movements of displaced people

[84] There is little information publicly available on the employment of these programs in the post-coup context; these authors are aware of a few programs, but the scope is extremely limited.

[85] For more on the severe lack of mental health services in post-coup Myanmar, please see: https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/its-heartbreaking-myanmars-mental-healthcare-vacuum/

[86] See: page 404, 'Clearing the Mines: Myanmar Mine Action Review 2021', accessible here: https://www.mineactionreview.org/assets/downloads/Myanmar_Clearing_the_Mines_2021.pdf

into new areas, and more recently, back into contaminated areas of origin, as the SAC is pushed back by resistance forces.

Despite the lack of a humanitarian clearance capacity, various ad-hoc efforts have and are occurring throughout Myanmar. These are often undertaken by resistance forces, whether EROs, PDFs, or civilians. It is likely that SAC is also conducting some form of clearance but is less documented and unlikely to be humanitarian focused. Most documented local efforts often involve local villagers or resistance forces digging out anti-personnel mines with knives or their bare hands. There are extensive videos and photographic evidence that this has been seen across Myanmar.[87] In some cases, resistance forces use other tools. In one case from Northern Shan State, an ERO used a mechanical digger smashing its bucket into the ground repeatedly, detonating anti-personnel blast mines that had been laid around a village.[88] These efforts are both courageous and extremely dangerous. Without adequate training or equipment, civilians and combatants are using tools they have at hand and knowledge gleaned from a variety of sources to try and make areas safe from explosive weapons. One local civilian removing mines in Kayah State, Phoe Zaw, who received no formal training, stated to Britain's Channel 4 News after digging up an anti-personnel blast mine:

> *I'm really happy I found it, and I'm proud that I've done it. I've saved a civilian from losing a leg.*" Asked if he was afraid of the risks, he states, "*Yes of course, I keep thinking about getting injured by a landmine. But what does it matter, if I lose a leg, I have to continue doing this job. As long as I am alive, I will continue doing this for my people.*[89]

6. Lessons Learned & Future Considerations

Assessing the current state of Myanmar's landmine and UXO contamination context paints a rather dire picture. Increased scale, complexity and geographic breadth of contamination, limited opportunities to provide risk education and victim assistance support, and virtually no large-scale survey or clearance activities means Myanmar's civilians face a dangerous future. Despite the challenges, one can observe a wide array of strategies employed by civilians, civil society, and resistance forces to try and reduce the impact of these weapons on civilian populations. These strategies have been innovative, adaptable, and resourceful. They are often developed and employed with limited on-the-ground support from external experts. Broadly speaking, these efforts point to the need for more resources to support localized responses. Funding, training, and providing materials allow local actors to undertake response activities themselves to at least begin to address the horrendous toll explosive weapons take. In addition,

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[87] For one example, see Radio Free Asia, 'Myanmar's shoestring deminers work with pliers and bare hands' accessible at: https://youtu.be/X769FlVUH3g?si=-7P0ti7746I3nVZi

[88] To view the video, please see: https://x.com/steven15htoo/status/1750160251515507090?s=61&t=rXeYQJ8gFHKTNEA0gwyWrg . It is assumed these were MNDAA troops in Northern Shan State.

[89] For this clip from the full Channel 4 documentary, please see: https://x.com/channel4news/status/1800836131275104445?s=61&t=rXeYQJ8gFHKTNEA0gwyWrg

based on analyzing the above strategies, there are a number of more focused efforts which are worth exploring.

In strengthening the capacity of local resources in conflict-affected areas, there appears to be an opportunity to further coordinate with local governance actors who closely engage with and provide services to local populations. For example, in Sagaing and Magwe, which are heavily contaminated, the NUG and its local administrative bodies can play a strong role in addressing the issue through EORE and victim assistance work. As these bodies generally have strong influence, trust, and close relationships with key actors in communities in these areas, their ability to mobilize and influence communities to address these threats are critical. In some areas, such as the Southeast, engagement with alternative governance actors has shown to be effective in reaching more people with both EORE and victim assistance support.[90] Further advocacy and engagement with these actors on issues of landmine/UXO contamination seems well worth the investment, while acknowledging the political sensitivities this can entail.

Collaborating with public figures whose followers align with the target audience can also be highly effective in spreading key messages. Some influencers, with hundreds of thousands or millions of followers on social media and other platforms, have openly stated their support for the revolution and have tremendous reach. Their involvement in the dissemination of information such as EORE messages could also be impactful, helping to engage a larger and more specific audience than those reached through traditional methods. People may be more likely to act based on personal recommendations and follow actions by the influencers who they admire in their daily lives. Their engagement with the wider audience can give more credibility, present information in a more persuasive way, and encourage more interest from their followers. Thus, engaging with such influencers on distributing key messages related to landmine/UXO contamination deserves further investigation by key actors.

While the dissemination of EORE messages has seen a number of innovations and adaptations to fit the post-coup context, this needs to be an ongoing process, constantly improving and adjusting in a dynamic context. Ongoing monitoring and evaluation of current practices, assessing what works and how to improve it in a changing context, and strengthening community capacities through relevant and effective community-based approaches foster trust and responses.[91] Digital EORE tools and strategies can be continually developed to complement, not substitute, interpersonal EORE interventions. This is particularly important in Myanmar, where many areas have poor internet coverage and deliberate internet cut-offs by the SAC, which can limit the potential of reaching people through digital means. After the imposition of restrictions on using VPNs and Facebook, in early June 2024, operators and their

[90] In the Southeast, education focused actors such as the Karen Teachers Working Group (KTWG) and the KNU's Education arm, the Karen Education & Culture Department (KECD), have played a strong role in introducing EORE into KNU-administered schools.

[91] See GICHD's New Technologies and Methodologies for Explosive Ordnance Risk Education (EORE) in Challenging Contexts https://www.eore.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/GICHD-EORE-New-Tech-and-Methods-Review.pdf

local partners will have to find alternative ways to reach more people.[92] This will depend on the status of further impositions by SAC, the opportunities available, and how people shift to other social media platforms.

In a time where new methods & approaches must be constantly piloted, it is critical for EORE practitioners to systematically analyze and document their results, share good practices and lessons learned, and build guidelines for new approaches, so these can be utilized elsewhere. Learning new approaches, promoting innovation, accelerating knowledge sharing, gathering evidence and addressing identified gaps among actors play pivotal roles in the rapid evolution of the EORE sector in Myanmar's challenging and complex operational environment. Relatedly, there is still a need to assess the effectiveness of these methods in behavior change through digital EORE campaigns and to consider gender and social norms in the use of internet and mobile phones.

It cannot be denied that digital EORE is highly cost-effective, increasing reach and coverage. However, it is very important to note that in insecure areas where there is increased scrutiny regarding the use of digital devices, staff and beneficiaries/at-risk communities may not feel comfortable or may even be put in danger when accessing sensitive information. This is due to the political environment, restrictions on certain apps and devices, and the needs to address challenges related to the privacy and security of data collected through digital platforms. For example, according to the results of an EORE-focused Facebook campaign, only 20% of the reached audience were women, while 80% were men. This shows the need to better understand and assess these approaches and adjust to ensure their inclusivity and relevance.[93]

Lastly, community-based & localized efforts related to both victim assistance and clearance must be better understood by international mine action actors, and where relevant and safe to do so, strengthened through increased funding & capacity support, so as to ensure activities are done safely and to accepted standards of quality. As seen throughout post-coup Myanmar[94] and before, localized humanitarian responses are not only more effective but in most cases are the only response available. As a result, they must be adequately supported by international humanitarian actors and donors.

7. Conclusion

Overall, the scale of explosive ordnance contamination is expected to escalate at an unprecedented rate due to the expanding conflict zones within the country. This escalation necessitates a continuous re-assessment of threats, the exploration and piloting of innovative

[92] For more on how this ban is impacting civilians, please see: https://sg.news.yahoo.com/myanmar-vpn-ban-plunging-citizens-095657430.html

[93] These campaigns are run through the Explosive Ordnance Risk Education in Myanmar Facebook page; for security reasons the administrators of this page are anonymous. Please see: https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100068836405510.

[94] There are ample articles & resources on the effectiveness of localized humanitarian aid, for one example, please see: https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2023/02/01/Myanmar-coup-Ukraine-cross-border-aid

approaches, and the reinforcement of mine action activities by various stakeholders. These efforts are crucial in mitigating risks and striving to create the safest possible environment. Achieving successful implementation of mine action activities remains challenging, particularly in regions experiencing intense conflict and where the SAC imposes stringent and unpredictable regulations on the operations of humanitarian workers. While this paper has outlined some of the responses employed to mitigate the threat of ERW in a post-coup context, it is clear that further, more focused research is required to better understand the impacts of these interventions and the further complex & multi-layered impacts this issue will have in Myanmar in the coming years and decades.

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Evaluation of Domestic Tourism in Myanmar from Pilgrimage to Leisure Travel

Myo Oo[95]

Abstract

This article investigates the evolution of Myanmar's domestic tourism through an analysis of travel literature. Historically, Myanmar's tourism was predominantly religious, with Buddhists taking pilgrimages to significant pagodas. However, following the launch of the "Visit Myanmar Year" campaign in 1996 and the emergence of new tourist destinations, domestic tourism has expanded to include recreational areas. Despite these developments, there is a lack of comprehensive research on the transformation of Myanmar's domestic tourism across historical periods—from ancient pilgrimages to contemporary leisure travel. An examination of colonial travel literature reveals a shift from pilgrimage to the practice of attending pagoda festivals. During the colonial period, pagoda festivals became central to domestic tourism, influenced by the religious calendar. Post-1996, following the Myanmar government's promotion of "Visit Myanmar Year," domestic tourism increasingly focused on leisure trips. This study highlights a significant gap in research concerning the colonial period's pagoda festival practice and its role in the evolution of Myanmar's domestic tourism.

Keywords: Pilgrimage, Pagoda Festival, Domestic Tourism, Leisure Travel

1. Introduction

Western tourism has catalyzed global interest in travel, but Asian tourism, particularly in recent years, has expanded significantly enough to warrant a dedicated study. These studies include analyses of Asian domestic tourism, Asian international tourism, and intra-Asian travel. However, there is a dearth of research on domestic tourism in Myanmar. This paper aims to address the gap in research concerning the colonial period's pagoda festival practice and its role in the evolution of Myanmar's domestic tourism.

Historically, pilgrimage was the predominant form of travel for Buddhists in ancient Asia (Chan Khoon San, 2001, p. 12). During the colonial period, large groups of Buddhists traveled to pagoda festivals using boats and carts. With modern transportation, Buddhists began visiting pagodas in Upper Myanmar, including those in Pagan and Mandalay, the Shwe Dagon Pagoda in Yangon, and Kyaik Htiyo in Mon State. This period also saw the flourishing of domestic tourism centered around pagoda festivals. Post-1996, with the launch of "Visit Myanmar Year" campaign in 1996, the development of tourist attractions spurred domestic tourism to focus on leisure rather than religious pilgrimage (Aung Zaw, 2007).

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Despite these developments, more research is needed on the historical progression of domestic tourism in Myanmar, from its origins in pilgrimage to its contemporary leisure-oriented form. An examination of colonial-era travel literature reveals that domestic tourism in Myanmar evolved from pilgrimages to pagoda festivals, paralleling the current trend of visiting pagodas during festival seasons. Post-1996, this trend has further shifted towards vacations and leisure travel.

To address this knowledge gap, this paper will present and discuss the practice of attending pagoda festivals during the colonial era as a fundamental element in developing domestic tourism in Myanmar. Colonial-era literature provides accounts of visits to pagoda festivals and offered insights into how the colonial period transformed domestic tourism, marking it a significant chapter in its history.

2. Pilgrimage

The definition of pilgrimage as detailed in *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition, Volume 10* is as follows:

> "A religious believer in any culture may sometimes look beyond the local temple church or shrine, feel the call of some distant holy place renowned for miracles and the revivification of faith, and resolve to journey there. … Whatever the site or culture, the general features of a pilgrim's journey are remarkably similar" (Jones, 2005, p. 7145).
>
> "The middle stage of a pilgrimage is marked by an awareness of temporary release from social ties and by a strong sense of communitas ("community, fellowship"), as well as by a preference for simplicity of dress and behaviour, by a sense of ordeal, and by reflection on the basic meaning of one's religion. Movement is the pilgrim's element, into which she or he is drawn by the spiritual magnetism of a pilgrimage canter" (Jones, 2005, p. 7145).

This definition suggests that pilgrimages served two primary purposes: first, the journey to distant holy sites for religious reasons, and second, a temporary release from social ties, fostering a sense of community and reflection. Therefore, pilgrimage can also be seen as a means of temporarily escaping everyday life's social and environmental pressures, particularly in crowded and polluted urban areas.

Bharati's paper, "Pilgrimage in the Indian Tradition," published in the *History of Religion* in 2012, offers a detailed account of the pilgrimage tradition in India, where Buddhism flourished. Bharati's research indicates that while the Vedas highlight the benefits of travel, it was only in the Purana texts that pilgrimage was recognized as a religious practice in Hinduism. Around 200 BC, the law teacher Gautama preached that visiting mountains, rivers, or temples could absolve sins (Bharati, 2013, p. 137). However, Hindu pilgrimage regulations were formalized in the third century A.D. with the creation of the Matsya Purana. Bharati's study also shows that Hindu pilgrimage sites possess rich topography, hagiography, and mythology elements (Bharati, 2013, p. 146).

Contrary to Hinduism, Bharati asserts that pilgrimage was not a mandated religious obligation for Buddhists, according to the Pali canon. There was no restriction against pilgrimage, nor

was there a necessity for Buddhists to undertake one. Bharati bases his theory on the description of the Buddhist pilgrimage ritual as centered around stupas, or *ceti*, which were structures containing the relics of the Buddha. This tradition of visiting the Buddha's relics after his *Mahaparinirvana* (passing away) is believed to be the origin of Buddhist pilgrimage practices (Bharati, 2013, p. 152). However, he also points out that the custom of Buddhist monks visiting pagodas likely arose from the Buddhist regulation prohibiting the establishment of a permanent dwelling place.

2.1. Pilgrimage in the Inwa Period

Bharati's research highlights the elements of mythology, hagiography, and topography at Hindu pilgrimage sites in India. Given the close cultural connections between the two traditions, this study will examine whether early Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Myanmar also exhibited these characteristics.

One of the best-known travel poems in ancient Myanmar literature is "Shwe Settaw-thwa Tawla" (The Lyric Poem recorded the Pilgrimage to Shwe Settaw Pagoda), composed by Ven. Maha Rahtathara and dates back approximately 600 years. It recounts his journey from the Inwa Capital to the Shwe Settaw Pagoda near Settawya Village in Mibu District, Magwe Division. This pagoda is believed to contain the actual footprints of the Buddha and is located in a remote jungle area. The mythological aspect of the Buddha's footprints, coupled with the topographical and hagiographical features, aligns with the criteria of a pilgrimage site. The poem vividly describes the natural beauty encountered during the journey, including traversing forests, crossing rivers, and encountering diverse wildlife.

Until the Inwa Period (1365-1842), Buddhist pilgrims traveled to sites rich in mythology, hagiography, and topography, similar to ancient Hindu pilgrimage sites. However, their journeys also included experiencing the serene environment and the natural sounds of the forest, suggesting a combination of spiritual pilgrimage and an appreciation of nature.

3. Going to Pagoda Festivals in the Colonial Period

The pagoda festivalgoers during the colonial period were often motivated by religious devotion and desire to enjoy performances, engage in commercial activities, and socialize. As mentioned in the Encyclopedia of Religion, these festivals provided opportunities for temporary release from social obligations and a chance to indulge in leisure.

The first notable trend observed was that locals traveled in groups by boats and bullock carts to the pagoda festivals. Although religious in nature, these trips were also seen as opportunities for enjoyment. Unlike the Ven. Shin Maha Rahtathara and his relatives during the Inwa Period, many festivalgoers in the colonial period attended the festivities not purely for pilgrimage. Commercial activities were also prevalent during the festival season.

Three Burmese literary sources illustrate how Buddhists in Myanmar celebrated pagoda festivals during that time. Two pieces are essays entitled "Shwedagon" (Shwe Dagon Pagoda) and "Anya Phaya-pwe" (Pagoda Festival in Upper Myanmar) extracted from the *Gndaloka Magazine* (the World of the Book), published in 1936 and 1934, and composed by Theikpan

Maung Wa, a pen name for U Sein Tin, an Oxford-educated sub-divisional gazette official of the British colonial government. The other is a chapter from the autobiography of U Chantha who was also an Oxford University-educated British Colonial Officer.

3.1. Shwe Dagon

Theikpan Maung Wa was a pioneer in the creation of modern Myanmar prose. Between 1929 and 1942, he served as a deputy commissioner and sub-divisional gazette officer in various locations across Lower Myanmar, including Hinthada, Zalon, Myaungmya, Nyaungdon, Yangon, and Insein, as well as in Upper Myanmar towns such as Kyaukse, Salin, Sagaing, Meikhtila, Minbu, and Shwebo (Theikpan Maung Wa, 2018).

In 1934, while working as a Deputy Commissioner, Maung Wa authored the essay "Shwe Dagon" (Shwe Dagon Pagoda). This essay is based on an incidental encounter with an elderly Karen man during his visit to Aywe Village in Nyaungdong Township, Ayeyarwaddy Division. The narrative was adapted to depict the older man's childhood journey to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda Festival with his companions. The older man, aged 86 at the time of recounting, had attended the festival when he was approximately 20 years old, situating his experience around 1948 and roughly 16 years after the British occupation of Lower Myanmar (Theikpan Maung Wa, 1965).

The Shwe Dagon Pagoda Festival was held annually in Yangon during Taboung, the 12th month of the Myanmar calendar, typically between January and February. The festival attracted people from cities and villages throughout the Irrawaddy Division and from Yangon and neighboring areas. These festivalgoers traveled by boat and cart from locations such as Myanaung, Hinthada, Zalon, Zagakyi, Danyphyu, and Nyaungdon. The essay highlights how festivalgoers from Lower Myanmar attended the Shwe Dagon Pagoda Festival, providing a unique contrast to the "Anya Phaya-pwe" (the Pagoda Festival in Upper Myanmar) (Theikpan Maung Wa, 1965, p. 155).

The story's central theme is the pilgrimage of the older man and his companions to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda Festival. The older man recounted that during Taboung, Yangon hosted the Shwedagon Pagoda festivals each year. Generally, Buddhists far or near and festival residents from cities and villages along the Irrawaddy and Panhlaing rivers went to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda Festival. Festivalgoers engaged in singing, dancing, and playing musical instruments during their journey. They also brought their food, stopping at convenient locations to cook and eat (Theikpan Maung Wa, 1965, pp. 155-156).

The narrative vividly describes the journey, emphasizing the participants' joyful experiences even before the festival. It depicts food preparation and communal dining scenes, evoking the pleasure of cooking and sharing meals during the pilgrimage. This portrayal allows readers to empathize with the emotions of the youth attending the festival (Theikpan Maung Wa, 1965, pp. 155-156).

The article also details the accommodations for the pilgrims. Those traveling by cart, such as attendees of the Salin festival, constructed temporary homes using bullock carts with elongated roofs. Food-related aspects are prominently featured, as restaurants played an integral role in

pagoda festivities in Myanmar. The elder Karen's retellings include the pilgrims' purchases and dining experiences at these eateries (Theikpan Maung Wa, 1965, p. 156).

In summary, Maung Wa's "Shwedagon" essay illustrates the pilgrimage journey to the Shwe Dagon Pagoda Festival and provides insights into the cultural and social dynamics of festival attendance in Lower Myanmar. The narrative captures the essence of communal travel, shared experiences, and the festival's multifaceted nature, encompassing both spiritual and social dimensions.

3.2. Shwe Settaw Pagoda Festival

In the autobiography of U Chantha, an Oxford University alumnus who served as the British government's I.C.S. Officer and the first head of the Bureau of Investigation Service in newly established Myanmar, he recalls his childhood in Minbu City. His childhood in Minbu City is recounted in the first chapter of his autobiographical book. In the initial part of this chapter, he narrates his journey by bullock cart with his parents to the Shwe Settaw Pagoda Festival (U Chantha, 2018).

This section vividly describes traveling to the pagoda festival, accompanied by crowds of people from neighboring towns and villages led by monks. Festival attendees brought food and clothing, spare parts for potential cart breakdowns, and straws from their homes for the cattle to eat at the camp (U Chantha, 2018, p. 20).

Several caravan parties carried musical instruments, singing and dancing during their journeys for relaxation and enjoyment. Some contemporary monks traveled with record players, playing dramas and songs at various locations during the day and night. Many festivalgoers experienced great joy during this period (U Chantha, 2018, pp. 20-24).

The narrative indicates that group dancing and playing musical instruments were standard practices during the colonial era. Although attending a pagoda festival was still a pilgrimage, the journey became an occasion for dancing and musical performances, distinguishing it from traditional pilgrimage practices (U Chantha, 2018, p. 24).

3.3. Activities during the Festival

During the colonial period, motivations to attend pagoda festivals varied by location. Some attendees engaged in economic activities alongside leisure. The article "Anya Phaya-pwe" (Pagoda Festival in Upper Myanmar), based on the author's 1936 experience at the Kuthinayon Pagoda celebration in Salin, Magwe Division, central Myanmar, describes the joy and celebration of the festivalgoers (Theikpan Maung Wa, 1965).

The essay focuses on the journey to the festival and the travelers' happiness. Both articles reveal that pagoda festivals were religious events as well as social and economic hubs. Pilgrims resided in temporary shelters made from bullock carts and engaged in buying, selling, and leasing farmland, registering transactions at the Salin township office (Theikpan Maung Wa, 1965, p. 174).

These accounts highlight that pagoda festivals served multiple purposes: religious devotion, socialization, and economic activity. The markets at these festivals offered a variety of goods, from religious items to clothing, creating a vibrant commercial environment. The festive atmosphere included plays, circuses, and food stalls, providing entertainment and sustenance to the attendees (Theikpan Maung Wa, 1965, pp. 174-176).

The descriptions of pagoda festivals in these literary sources show that while they retained their religious significance, they also became critical social and economic events. Festivalgoers engaged in communal activities, enjoyed entertainment, and conducted business, reflecting a multifaceted approach to pilgrimage and festivity during the colonial period.

4. Domestic Tourism Development in Myanmar

During the period of independence, it was discovered that Burmese citizens frequently engaged in domestic travel, with pagodas being popular tourist destinations. A portion of the visitors spent their time at rest homes or monasteries. Owing to advancements in transportation since the colonial era, Buddhists from Myanmar visited pagodas in Upper Myanmar, Yangon's Shwe Dagon Pagoda, and Mon State's Kyeik Hityo. As a result, domestic tourism began to grow during the pagoda festival season. The core of domestic tourism in Myanmar gradually shifted from pilgrimage to leisure travel due to changes in transportation, economy, and governance.

Following the launch of the "Visit Myanmar Year" campaign in 1996, Myanmar's domestic tourist industry grew. More parks and recently opened beaches were available for domestic tourists to visit and unwind. As more domestic tourists traveled to newly developed tourist destinations, they were less inclined to visit pagodas and more likely to relax in parks and beaches (Aung Zaw, 2007). Domestic travel has thus shifted away from its original purpose of pilgrimage and towards the essence of Western tourism, which places a premium on relaxation.

4.1. New Domestic Tourist Destinations and Leisure Travel

Travel destinations have increased in the 2000s, drawing both domestic and foreign travelers. Parks and beaches are the newly created alternative travel destinations in Myanmar. Western tour operators and travelers have looked for fresh, alternative, more exciting, and exotic locations away from the crowded, overdeveloped resorts of Europe and North America (Teo & Chang 1998, p. 120; King, 2008, p. 1; Hitchcock et al., 2008, p. 1). This article aims to find the reason why Myanmar domestic tourists have searched for new destinations both in local and foreign destinations.

Myanmar has recently started using beaches as alternative travel locations. Tourists from Myanmar visited beaches in the country's west and south. The well-known beach Ngapali, which attracts tourists worldwide, is located in Rakhine State on the country's western coast. Other well-known beaches in the area include Chaungtha and Ngwesaung in Ayeyarwaddy Division, Maungmagan in Mon State, and several small beaches in Dawe and Thaninthayi, Taninthayi Division. Goyangyi Island is the most famous island of the recently opened beaches in the Ayeyawady Division (Global New Light of Myanmar, January 10, 2024). Visitors can enjoy swimming, playing volleyball on the sandbank, and eating seafood at resorts.

According to Yamashita (2000), Japanese people have been searching for a more leisurely lifestyle in Bangkok, a phenomenon Machiko Sato (2001) dubbed "lifestyle migrants." (Yamashita_2008, p. 200). This theory helps to understand the reason why tourists from Myanmar are now enjoying day getaways. Understandably, tourists from Myanmar look for day trips to destinations that are distinct from everyday life. Living in a small apartment and juggling excessive work makes vacation more relaxing. People are becoming more interested in day trips to escape crowded cities and decompress from their jobs. The availability of affordable package vacations offered by private domestic tour operators is another contributing factor. Parks are also becoming increasingly popular travel destinations for local tourists. The most well-known is the Maymyo Botanical Garden, situated in Maymyo, halfway between Shan Hill and Central Myanmar. This garden is a park full of flowers that bloom in their seasons when the weather is nice (Kyehmon Newspaper, 2016).

Apart from the previously mentioned facts, domestic pilgrimage agencies in Myanmar increased to over 600 and facilitate an understanding of the development of domestic tourism in Myanmar (N.P. News, 2023).

This brief account on the development of domestic tourism in Myanmar after 1996 reveals how much the essence of domestic tourism departed from pilgrimage in the Inwa Period.

5. Discussion

According to a definition taken from the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, pilgrimages have two main purposes: visiting distant holy sites for religious reasons and taking a break from societal obligations. Buddhists chose their trip locations similarly to Hindus. They visited places rich in topography, mythology, and hagiography.

This study scrutinized three pieces of travel literature that recounted colonial-period experiences at pagoda festivals. These accounts depict how festivalgoers enjoyed their journey and the festival. People enjoyed dancing and playing musical instruments on the way to the event. The festivalgoers celebrated the religious festival with business fairs, business activities, and entertainment. These accounts show how the journey was distinct from a conventional pilgrimage.

Three existing research studies have been chosen to study the pilgrimage and pagoda festivals of domestic travel in Myanmar. In his research paper entitled "Domestic Tourism and its Spatiality in Myanmar: A dynamic and geographical vision," Michalon (2018) states that although religion has shaped the country's travel geography, more touristic practices could be possible in Myanmar.

J.G. Scott mentioned three points in his seminal book *The Burma: His Life and Nations* (1882). The first point is that the boundary between pilgrimage and tourism has never been clear. The second point is that the pagoda festival became widespread and celebrating a festival near a town spoiled the natural character of a festival. The third is that the pagoda festival introduced elements of 19th-century civilization, such as merry-go-rounds and hack carriages. Out of Scott's three points, the first reveals the ambiguity of pilgrimage at that time. The other two points focus on the changing nature of the pagoda festival.

In his doctoral dissertation, Lubeigt questioned, "What attracts most pilgrimage visitors to a pagoda festival? Religious festivals, commercial fairs, or amusements available?" He answers his questions by saying that the purely religious pagoda festival is a very secondary aspect of the festival (Lubeigt, 2000).

According to the existing research on domestic travel in Myanmar, there is no clear boundary between pilgrimage and leisure travel. Scholars, on the other hand, recognize that religious festivals are secondary aspects of them. However, scrutinizing Theikpan Maung Wa's essays depicting pagoda festivals and U Chantha's biography, it can be concluded that pilgrimage was a form of tourism as seen in the practice of the pagoda festival during the colonial period. Over time, the evolution of pilgrimage steadily changed its natural character of conventional pilgrimage to add the essence of leisure travel. The practice has continued as domestic tourism expanded to include recreational areas. Domestic travel changed from pilgrimage to leisure travel.

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The Role of Reactionary Identity in Impeding Myanmar's Democratic Revolution: A Critical Analysis of Constructed Realities and their Implications for Social and Political Transformation

Naing Htike Aung[96]

Abstract

In the context of Myanmar's complex political landscape, the construction and propagation of reactionary identities have emerged as significant barriers to the nation's democratic revolution and progress toward a democratic federal union. This research aims to critically analyze how various actors, such as religious leaders, crony capitalists, and ethno-nationalists, construct and perpetuate reactionary identities, and the implications of these constructed realities for social cohesion and transformative change. By employing a qualitative approach and drawing upon a critical perspective through Assemblage Theory, this study seeks to uncover the power dynamics and mechanisms through which reactionary identities impede social and political development in Myanmar. It highlights the importance of understanding the diverse nature of these identities and the context-specific factors that contribute to their construction. The findings of this research will offer insights into the challenges faced by Myanmar's democratic revolution and the barriers created by reactionary identities. Moreover, it will provide a deeper understanding of the impact of these identities on social cohesion and the potential avenues for fostering transformative change in the country's current context. Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on the intersection of identity, politics, and social development in Myanmar, emphasizing the need for more inclusive and progressive narratives for the nation's future.

Keywords: Reactionary Identity, Democratic Revolution, Myanmar, Constructed Reality, Social Cohesion, Transformative Change, Power Dynamics, Religious Leaders, Crony, Ethno-Nationalists, Assemblage Theory

Introduction

As a Southeast Asian country, Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) gained independence from the British on January 4, 1948. Since 1948, Myanmar's politics have been tumultuous, continuing to this day. In Myanmar, there have been numerous significant protests, demonstrations, uprisings, and revolutions throughout its history, with some of the most notable events beginning in 1962: the 1962 Rangoon University Students Protests also known as the July 7th Uprising in 1962, U Thant Funeral Crisis in 1974, 1988 Popular People

[96] Independent Researcher

Revolution also known as 8888 Uprising in 1988, Saffron Revolution in 2007, and Spring Revolution in 2021. These events have shaped the socio-political landscape of Myanmar, reflecting the people's resilience and determination to fight for democracy, human rights, and freedom. Among these significant events, the 8888 Uprising and the Spring Revolution stand out as the largest and most widespread, having involved people from across the entire country. In addition to the two largest events, the Saffron Revolution stands out as the second most extensive demonstration, drawing considerable attention and support from people across the country.

Despite huge popular support, including the Civil Disobedience Movement, the Spring Revolution which started in early 2021 has still not prevailed against entrenched military authority. Many commentators have focused on military and political matters. There has been less focus on the non-military elements of society that tacitly oppose or resist revolutionary movements. In *revolutionary* terms, these have often been termed as *'reactionary.'*

The Oxford English Dictionary defines reactionary as "inclined or favourable to reaction; opposing political or social progress or reform; (hence, loosely) extremely conservative."[97] According to the Cambridge Dictionary, reactionary is defined as "a person who is opposed to political or social change or new ideas: Reactionaries are preventing reforms".[98] The Britannica Dictionary defines it as "a person who is strongly opposed to new political or social ideas."[99] The European Center for Populism Studies explains, "A reactionary is a person who wants to reverse political changes and seeks to restore society to a state believed to have existed before. In political science, a reactionary or reactionarist can be defined as a person or entity holding political views that favor a return to a previous political state of society that they believe possessed characteristics that are negatively absent from the contemporary status quo of a society. As an adjective, the word reactionary describes points of view and policies meant to restore a past status quo.*"*[100]

The construction and propagation of reactionary identities have emerged as significant barriers to the nation's democratic revolution and progress toward a democratic federal union. Three sources of reactionary resistance to the revolution are religious leaders, especially the extreme Buddhist monks, crony capitalists and ethnonationalists. The first source of reactionary resistance to the revolution can be found in the *Sangha* (Myanmar's Buddhist monastic community). There is a great shift in the role of *Sangha* from the Saffron Revolution compared to the Spring Revolution. The second resistance source is the crony capitalists' backlash to NLD's reforms of powerful business interests as the cronies profit from isolationist economic policies. The third reactionary force is ethnonationalists, minorities whose oppression was maintained or increased under democratic rule.

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[97] Oxford English Dictionary, https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=reactionary
[98] Cambridge Dictionary, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/reactionary
[99] The Britannica Dictionary, https://www.britannica.com/dictionary/reactionary
[100] The European Center for Populism Studies,
https://www.populismstudies.org/Vocabulary/reactionary-populism/

This research paper aims to examine the construction, perpetuation, and implications of reactionary identities through the theoretical perspective of assemblage theory. DeLanda (2016) suggests that the English term 'assemblage' does not fully express the meaning of the original French term *'agencement,'* which describes the process of fitting together different parts. DeLanda (2016) provides a simpler explanation of an assemblage, describing it as a grouping of diverse components that combine in a specific manner."It is a multiplicity which is made up of many heterogeneous terms and which establishes liaisons, relations between them, across ages, sexes and reigns – different natures. Thus, the assemblage's only unity is that of a co-functioning: it is a symbiosis, a 'sympathy'. It is never filiations which are important, but alliances, alloys; these are not successions, lines of descent, but contagions, epidemics, the wind."

This concept emphasizes the connections and relationships formed between these varied elements, which can span various boundaries such as age, gender, and time periods. The essence of an assemblage lies in the cooperation and mutual dependence of its parts, akin to a symbiotic relationship. Rather than focusing on lineage or inheritance, the assemblage theory highlights the significance of collaborations and the blending of elements. This dynamic system can be compared to the spread of contagious phenomena or natural forces like the wind.

This research aims to elucidate the connections between diverse actors, such as religious leaders, crony capitalists, and ethno-nationalists, in constructing reactionary identities that impede the progress of the Spring Revolution. To better understand these dynamics, the study employs the Assemblage Theory, focusing on the following key aspects:

1. Heterogeneous elements: The diverse range of actors, including religious leaders, crony capitalists, and ethno-nationalists, represent the heterogeneous elements within the assemblage.

2. Relationships and alliances: The paper investigates the power dynamics and interactions among these actors in forming reactionary identities and explores how these relationships contribute to hindering the Spring Revolution.

3. Co-functioning and symbiosis: The study examines the interplay between these diverse elements and their symbiotic relationships within the assemblage to better comprehend the obstacles posed to the revolutionary movement.

4. Contagions and epidemics: Using Assemblage Theory's metaphor of contagions and epidemics, the research analyzes how reactionary identities spread across society and the challenges they pose to fostering more inclusive and progressive narratives.

By considering these aspects of the Assemblage Theory, this paper offers valuable insights into the complex dynamics and power relations that shape reactionary identities, ultimately undermining the progress of the Spring Revolution.

Background

"Nay more, they are reactionary, for they try to roll back the wheel of history."

- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1848

In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels (1848) argue that even if the lower middle class[101] fight against the bourgeoisie, they are regarded as not revolutionary but conservative and reactionary to save their existence from extinction as fractions of the middle class. This perspective on reactionary behavior is considerably more stringent than liberal viewpoints on the matter.

As stated by Capelos and Katsanidou (2018), reactionism shares a connection with traditionalism, which involves a commitment to preserving familiar cultural beliefs and practices, along with a strong aversion to change. However, reactionism goes further by incorporating an emotional element of resentment into these traditionalist values."Reactionism relates to traditionalism, which expresses the willingness to maintain beliefs and practices akin to one's familiar culture and a clear unwillingness towards change, but it adds resentful affect to traditionalist values" (Capelos & Katsanidou, 2018).

According to Capelos and Katsanidou (2018), reactionism favors predictability and traditional values, such as conventional family structures, a shared culture, a sovereign nation-state, and secure borders. However, reactionism goes beyond traditionalism by incorporating an emotionally charged element, which manifests as xenophobia and subtle forms of racism.

There is a noticeable similarity between the concept of reactionary and post-modern conservative, as evident in McManus's research. Both notions share common characteristics, such as a focus on maintaining traditional power structures and a resistance to progressive change, thus demonstrating a strong overlap between the two ideas."…. the angry and prideful post-modern conservative who seeks to totalize their identity across society…. they [post-modern conservatives] demonstrate a reactionary demand to reassert the authority of historically powerful social groups. They are of course critical of and even outright dismissive of liberalism. And while they do tend to support institutions such as nation, family, culture, church, and so on, this support is at least in part driven by a desire to stabilize their sense of self in the uneven seas of neoliberalism" (McManus, 2020).

Furthermore, Capelos and others stress on reactionism and revolutionary radicalism."Uncompromising reactionism and revolutionary radicalism share disaffection with the present but their realities collide as they gaze in opposite directions: the reactionary orientation towards the restoration of an often idealized past, and the radical orientation towards the establishment of a different, imagined future" (Capelos, T. et al 2021).

The scholarly works on reactionary ideologies highlight the similarities between conservatism and reactionism to a certain degree. Robin (2011) views conservatism and reactionism as

[101] According to Marx & Engels, the lower middle class are the small manufacturer, the shopkeeper, the artisan, the peasant.

synonymous, using terms such as conservative, reactionary, and counterrevolutionary interchangeably. He further contends that while not all counterrevolutionaries are necessarily conservative, all conservatives exhibit counterrevolutionary tendencies to some extent. Based on Robin's perspective, conservatives or reactionaries can be considered counterrevolutionary in nature.

In the context of Myanmar, the reactionary identity can be seen in *"Wunthanu"* or the "Loving One's Race" movement. In her article, Than (2015) explores several key aspects related to Burmese nationalism and the *Wunthanu* movement, including: (1) the historical origins of the "Loving One's Race" movement and its connection to Burmese nationalism, (2) the rationalization of violence and the promotion of an uncompromising stance against the "other" by the contemporary *Ma-Ba-Tha* organization, (3) the process by which Buddhist monks have become politicized throughout history, and (4) the role of relationships between Buddhist monks and their female followers in sustaining both the old and new iterations of the *Wunthanu* movement. By examining these interconnected issues, Than provides insights into the complex dynamics surrounding Burmese nationalism and its relationship with Buddhist monasticism.

Research Question & Methodology

This study aims to delve into the complex interplay between various reactionary identities and their impact on Myanmar's democratic revolution, social cohesion, and transformative change. The research question guiding this investigation asks: How do different types of reactionary identities, as components of mental assemblage, contribute to the construction of social and political realities that hinder Myanmar's progress towards a democratic revolution, and what implications does this have for social cohesion and transformative change? To address this question, a critical discourse analysis of key texts will be employed as the primary methodology. The texts under examination include sermons, newspaper and media articles, and public statements of political and business organizations. By exploring the dynamics of reactionary identities in Myanmar's socio-political landscape, this research seeks to contribute valuable insights into the challenges and prospects for the country's ongoing journey towards a more democratic, unified, and transformative future.

Findings: a Silent Sangha[102]?

The International Crisis Group notes that in past instances of political unrest in Myanmar, such as the independence movement of the early 20th century and protests in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s, and the 2007 Saffron Revolution, monks played a noticeable role despite concerns about their involvement in politics. However, since the coup, the monastic community has been divided. Some prominent monks have sought to gain favor with the regime by openly supporting it, while a few others have been outspoken opponents. The majority of monks, though, have refrained from publicly taking sides due to apprehensions about supporting a

[102] *Sangha,* a Sanskrit word refers to the monastic communities of *bhikkhu* (monks) and *bhikkhuni* (nuns). However, in the context of Myanmar Buddhist society, *it* only refers to the monks. (Author's note)

secular resistance movement engaged in armed struggle, the potential repercussions of challenging the regime, and the fear of facing public anger for supporting it (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The Crisis Group identifies three primary factions within the monastic community in Myanmar: monks who support the regime, those who refrain from taking sides, and those who openly back the revolution (International Crisis Group, 2023). The breakdown of these factions provides insight into the complex and varied responses to the political upheaval within the country. This recognition also emphasizes the significance of understanding the diverse perspectives within the *Sangha* and how these perspectives are shaped by a multitude of internal and external factors. According to the Crisis Group, the first group of monks, who are characterized as supporters of the regime, are typically older and more experienced. They have either openly declared their backing for the military through their attendance at regime-sponsored events and trips, or have implied their support by highlighting the violence committed by resistance groups while neglecting to acknowledge the atrocities committed by the military. The second group consists of monks who choose to remain neutral. Several factors have contributed to this neutrality, with one of the primary reasons being the possibility of facing violent reprisals from the junta for speaking out against them. There have been instances where soldiers have demolished or burned monasteries, leaving the surrounding community without a vital social asset. The fears of such consequences and the desire to avoid conflict have led many monks to refrain from taking sides in the political crisis. The third group of monks comprises those who openly support the revolution. Despite acknowledging that their numbers are significantly smaller compared to those who participated in the Saffron Revolution, these monks exhibit their engagement in various forms, despite facing numerous constraints (International Crisis Group, 2023). While International Crisis Group's findings are mostly accurate, one crucial aspect they failed to address was the role of the Ma-Ba-Tha in constructing and perpetuating reactionary identities among the monastic community in Myanmar. However, the Crisis Group remarks that the impact of the small group of pro-regime monks [such as *Ma-Ba-Tha*] should not be overstated.

A close examination of the Crisis Group's observations reveals that reactionary elements within the *Sangha* can be identified in the monks who either openly support the regime or choose to remain neutral. The former group's reactionary identity seems to be rooted in their high social status as spiritual guides to the state leaders, achieved through cooperation with powerful military generals. This alliance not only secures generous support and donations from the regime but also ensures that their basic needs, such as alms, robes, monasteries, and medicines, are met.

On the other hand, the reactionary stance of the monks who refrain from taking sides appears to be motivated by the fear instilled by the military. These monks prioritize their survival and the preservation of their monasteries, leading them to maintain the status quo by avoiding any direct involvement in the political conflict. In essence, both groups demonstrate reactionary tendencies, albeit with different underlying reasons, as they seek to safeguard their respective interests amidst the turbulent political landscape.

There has been a significant shift in the role of Buddhist monks in Myanmar's popular Spring Revolution compared to their involvement in the Saffron Revolution. The Spring Revolution, which began in 2021, emerged 14 years after the Saffron Revolution, which took place in 2007. This timeframe has witnessed a notable transformation in the ways Buddhist monks participate and contribute to Myanmar's ongoing political and social movements. Six years after the Saffron Revolution of 2007, the Organization for the Protection of Race and Religion, known as *Ma-Ba-Tha*, was established on June 27, 2013 (Kyaw, 2023). This organization plays a significant role in Myanmar's political landscape, particularly in the years following its formation.

According to Than (2015), Buddhist monks have actively engaged in secular matters and positioned themselves as the guardians of tradition, race, and religion. Some *Sangha's* construction of reactionary identity is also based on the protection of race and religion propagandized by the *Ma-Ba-Tha*. This is rooted in a fear of loss of identity and role in society, and overlaps with some populist discourses on race.

According to Ashin Kovida, a prominent activist monk, the Sangha—Myanmar's Buddhist monastic community—faces considerable internal challenges. Many monks remain influenced by the military regime, perceiving it as their guardian while viewing democracy as a threat. This ideological rift within the Sangha hinders its unity in advocating for human rights and democracy (Insight Myanmar, 2024).

Ven Zawana, a former prisoner of conscience who now resides in New York, reveals that he is totally unsatisfied with the extent of the Buddhist monks' participation and contributions in the current resistance."As I was saying earlier, the education system for the people changed in a positive way recently but monastic education has remained the same. I know a monk who has done very well in academics but he still believes the lie that the country will be converted into an Islamic state if the National League for Democracy (NLD), which is led by the detained leader Aung San Suu Kyi, continues to govern it" (DVB Multimedia Group, 2023).

In addition, Ven Zawana emphasizes that his young and bright students, who are novices, are also fed the same false narrative. He argues that the military has systematically disseminated this misinformation for decades, resulting in many monks believing it. This distorted belief has led some monks to view those who support the resistance as traitors to their religion and ethnicity. According to the speaker, the monastic education system's inability to encourage independent thinking is a significant contributing factor to this situation. He laments that even today, *Sangha Maha Nayaka*, the governing body of Buddhist monks, does not deem it necessary to include English language instruction in the monastic curriculum, citing the misconception that teaching English will prompt monks to leave the country (DVB Multimedia Group, 2023).

An analysis of Van Zawana's interview suggests that the monastic education system's failure to promote independent thinking significantly contributes to the development and perpetuation of reactionary identities. This issue is further exacerbated by the military's long-standing dissemination of systematic misinformation, ultimately fostering a reactionary environment within the affected population.

Ven. Detta views the role of Burmese monk as: "Without a doubt, monks can play a huge, tremendous role. Many people in Myanmar are religious, and will no doubt listen to what a monk will have to say. And there are several dozen monks who have immense sway over public opinion. I think they need to stand up; they need to be on the right side of the history. They need to speak from a religious perspective" (Insight Myanmar, 2023).

The military coup has led to a disappointing lack of support from the majority of monks and monasteries for the people of Myanmar. This has prompted a decrease in food and other donations to many monasteries across the country. People are questioning the need to continue supporting monks who have failed to reciprocate support during this challenging period. This situation highlights the importance of Ven. *Detta*'s aspiration that Myanmar's monastic community will eventually leverage their spiritual influence to guide the security forces in alleviating the suffering inflicted upon the nation's citizens (Insight Myanmar, 2023)."The Sangha, Myanmar's Buddhist monastic community, has largely stayed out of politics since the 2021 coup. As youth take the vanguard of resistance, a long-term shift in the country's civic life—and a conservative backlash—could be in the offing. The issue bears close watching" (International Crisis Group, 2023).

An analysis of the factors contributing to reactionary identities within the Sangha community reveals several sources of reactionary behavior. For some monks, their reactions are shaped by their role as spiritual guides to state leaders (the status of teacher of the king or *Minn Sayar* in Burmese) while others are driven by concerns over losing financial support from the junta or their monasteries. The power dynamics between monks and the military junta play a significant role in shaping the reactionary identities of this group. In the context of the Burmese Buddhist community, where monks hold a highly esteemed position in society, the military seeks to bolster its public image and legitimacy by portraying itself as devout Buddhists. This is achieved through visible acts of generosity towards prominent monks as well as the construction of pagodas. These actions ultimately contribute to the formation of reactionary views among the monks, who perceive their elevated social status as intertwined with the military's patronage.

The second group's reactions stem from the perceived need to protect their religion and ethnicity, influenced by the narratives propagated by *Ma-Ba-Tha* and the military junta. The third group's reaction is connected with the monastic education system's inability to encourage independent thinking. The monastic education system's failure to promote independent thinking has led some monks to readily accept false narratives systematically spread by the military over the years. Examples of such narratives include the supposed threat of federalism leading to the disintegration of the union due to external forces and the belief that embracing democracy would lead to the decline of Buddhism and ethnic dilution. As noted by Ven. *Zawana*, these distorted beliefs have led some monks to view resistance supporters as traitors to their religion and ethnicity.

Findings: the Cronies Return

Myanmar's economic landscape has long been influenced by crony capitalism, characterized by a close-knit network of military-aligned business elites reaping most of the benefits.

Drawing from observations by researchers like Stokke et al. (2018), Myanmar's large informal economy is supported by informal elite agreements established during the military era, often involving individuals associated with the military and crony companies.

During the SLORC/SPDC era, the country witnessed a significant shift as the socialist economic policies of the BSPP were abandoned, while the military's role in the economy expanded. This was achieved through military-owned enterprises and crony networks that gained control over key sectors such as construction, natural resource extraction, and tourism (Jones, 2013; Selth, 2001).

Recent economic reforms under the NLD government threatened the economic hegemony of Myanmar's cronies, prompting a return to more isolationist and authoritarian economic policies that allowed cronies to re-assert their power. Since the 2021 coup, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing has sought to strengthen Myanmar's ties with Russia, relying on Moscow's cooperation in the military, economic, and energy sectors (The Irrawaddy, 2023). Several Myanmar tycoons have been eager to help Min Aung Hlaing in this endeavor, viewing it as a lucrative opportunity.

As highlighted in Justice for Myanmar's initial "Dirty Over 30" list, several of Myanmar's wealthiest tycoons have established their businesses in Singapore, taking advantage of its favorable business environment, with some even enjoying luxurious lifestyles in the city-state. According to the report by Justice for Myanmar (2023), despite operating in various industries, the individuals mentioned share two significant similarities: they have amassed their wealth by backing atrocities, mass killings, and war crimes in Myanmar, and their age suggests that they should be well aware of the consequences of their actions. The report emphasizes that Singapore has the ability and responsibility to prevent such unethical practices and to obstruct the Myanmar military junta's access to financial resources, weapons, equipment, and technology. Numerous reports published by Justice for Myanmar have exposed the connections between crony capitalists and the military junta as well as the ways in which these tycoons have provided support for the junta's acts of brutality, mass murders, and war crimes in Myanmar (Justice for Myanmar, 2021a, 2021b, 2024).

Thus, Myanmar's experience with crony capitalism continues to be shaped by the close relationship between military elites and business interests, highlighting the importance of understanding the underlying power dynamics and economic structures that construct and perpetuate the reactionary identity of the cronies.

Findings: Pyusawhti or the New Ethno-nationalists

Pyusawhti, a term for a range of pro-junta militia, are often motivated by a need to defend religious and ethnic identities, often rooted in specific geographies. This explains the role of some Buddhist monks and other religious leaders as sponsors and organizers of these armed groups. According to Kavi (2024), Myanmar's ruling regime has reportedly been forming "people's militias" in various regions, including Yangon, Bago, Tanintharyi, and Mon State, to bolster its depleted military forces. The militia members are reportedly offered incentives such as weapons, cash, and food in exchange for their service. According to RFA (2023), an ultranationalist Buddhist monk is at the forefront of the military regime's fight against the

armed rebellion in Myanmar's Sagaing region. This monk has reportedly created a network of pro-junta militias by employing tactics of violence and fostering fear among the local population. RFA (2023) continues their reports that the local perception of these Buddhist monks involved in the conflict in Sagaing region is negative. The locals believe that these monks manipulate people's religious beliefs, exploiting their faith to mislead them. Consequently, the people consider these monks to be malevolent figures. "A network of hardline, pro-military groups known as Pyusawhti is doing its best to spread terror among the population as it fights a dirty war against the democratic forces resisting the coup" (Frontier Myanmar, 2021)."Today's [Pyusawhti] groups evolved out of pre-existing local networks consisting of individuals who are ideologically pro-regime, as well as others – such as members of the military-established Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) – who fear being targeted by the resistance, whether or not they actively support the junta" (International Crisis Group, 2022).

However, not all *Pyusawhti* members can be categorized as ethno-nationalists, as some harbor reactionary views stemming from personal interests. These individuals often enjoy authority status within their local communities, where pro-military supporters predominantly reside. Operating under the guise of "people's militia,"[103] they exploit their positions of power in various ways, ultimately serving their own agendas rather than purely ideological motivations. Some *Pyusawhti* members exhibit reactionary behavior rooted in their drive for survival. This motivation encompasses both basic needs and the fear of being targeted by the military, underscoring the complex and multifaceted nature of their actions. According to RFA Burmese (2024), residents in Myanmar's southwestern Bago region are reportedly being pressured by the military to join pro-junta militias. Incentives such as money and rice are allegedly being offered and those who refuse to join must face fines and even threats of having their villages destroyed.

Besides *Pyusawhti*, there was an ultra-extreme version of *Pyusawhti* which is called *Thway Thauk*. The role of *Thway Thauk* is undermined due to their seldom appearance. According to a Mandalay activist, "Thway Thauk is believed to be linked to the ultranationalist Buddhist hardline group Ma-Ba-Tha, which was banned under the NLD, and infamous anti-Muslim monk Wirathu." He said this "poses a great concern to those of other religions, especially the Muslim community" (Nachemson & Hlaing, 2022).

The formation of reactionary identities within the *Pyusawhti* can be traced to multiple interconnected elements. Firstly, ethno-nationalist motivations play a significant role, as many members aim to safeguard their religious and ethnic identities tied to particular regions. This often leads to Buddhist monks and other religious figures sponsoring and organizing these armed groups. Additionally, personal interests contribute to reactionary views among certain *Pyusawhti* members, who hold influential positions within their local communities where pro-military support is prevalent. These individuals might leverage their power under the pretext of being part of a "people's militia," for personal gain rather than purely ideological reasons. Lastly, survival needs and apprehension of military retaliation serve as motivating factors for

[103] The terms *Pyusawhti* and People's Militia are used interchangeably.

some *Pyusawhti* members. This may involve both fundamental needs and fear of military targeting, reflecting the complexity and multifaceted nature of their actions.

Collectively, these factors demonstrate the intricate interplay of religious, ethnic, political, and personal interests shaping reactionary identities within the *Pyusawhti* and exemplifying the broader sociopolitical complexities of Myanmar's ongoing upheaval.

Conclusion: Fear and Self-interest Fan the Reactionary Flame

The Reactionary Buddhist Monks: Using aspects of the Assemblage Theory, we can analyze the development of reactionary identities among Buddhist monks and draw the following conclusion: the complex interplay of heterogeneous elements, power dynamics, and the co-functioning of these elements within the assemblage significantly impacts the emergence and persistence of reactionary identities among Buddhist monks in Myanmar.

The complex interplay of fear and self-interest, as heterogeneous elements, has intensified the development of reactionary identities within Myanmar's Sangha between the Saffron Revolution and the Spring Revolution. Various factors, including power dynamics, financial concerns, fear propagation, perceived protection of race and religion, and a monastic education system that fails to encourage independent thinking, have contributed to this transformation. These elements, when interconnected, create an assemblage that shapes the reactionary identities of Buddhist monks.

The relationships and alliances formed between the military junta, Ma-Ba-Tha, and reactionary Buddhist monks have resulted in significant obstacles to Myanmar's pursuit of a democratic revolution. The power dynamics at play within this assemblage directly impact social and political development in the country.

One notable aspect of this assemblage is the collaboration between reactionary monks and the military regime, which acts as a contagion, spreading resistance to democratic values and practices. This symbiotic relationship perpetuates the existing inequalities and obstructs transformative change in Myanmar.

Additionally, the economic entanglement between the military regime and reactionary monks contributes to the co-functioning of this assemblage, providing favorable opportunities and preferential treatment to these monks while reinforcing inequalities.

The collusion between reactionary Buddhist monks and the military junta further undermines social cohesion in Myanmar, acting as an epidemic that spreads mistrust and resentment among the wider population. This symbiosis within the assemblage challenges the unity needed for a successful pro-democracy movement.

The assemblage of fear, self-interest, and power dynamics among reactionary Buddhist monks and the military junta has far-reaching implications for social cohesion and transformative change in Myanmar. Their role in the nation's political and religious spheres not only perpetuates the status quo but also exacerbates societal divisions, making it more challenging to achieve a democratic revolution.

The Crony Capitalists: By applying the various aspects of Assemblage Theory, we can examine the development of reactionary identities among crony capitalists and arrive at the following deduction: the intricate interconnection of diverse elements, power dynamics, and the synergistic functioning of these elements within the assemblage considerably influences the formation and endurance of reactionary identities among crony capitalists in Myanmar. The assemblage of business interests, power dynamics, and economic structures has led to the emergence of reactionary identities among cronies in Myanmar. These heterogeneous elements interact and co-function in ways that perpetuate the status quo and resist change. Cronies' alignment with the military junta allows them to capitalize on the existing power arrangements and secure favorable economic opportunities, reinforcing their support for the regime.

This symbiotic relationship between cronies and the military junta impedes the nation's progress towards a democratic revolution. The power dynamics within this assemblage create challenges for the transition to a democratic system, as cronies' support for the regime maintains the existing power structure that stifles democratic values.

The economic entanglement between cronies and the regime acts as a contagion within the assemblage, spreading and reinforcing inequalities that obstruct transformative change in Myanmar. This alliance provides cronies with preferential treatment in their business dealings, further perpetuating the economic disparities that hinder the country's progress.

The collusion between cronies and the military junta functions as an epidemic within the assemblage, eroding social cohesion by fostering societal divisions, mistrust, and resentment. This symbiosis between elements challenges the unity needed for a successful pro-democracy movement and entrenches existing divides.

The influence and power of cronies within the assemblage present additional obstacles to dismantling the military regime. Their role in the nation's economic and political spheres offers the junta a network of loyalists who benefit from the current system, adding another layer of complexity to the efforts aimed at achieving a democratic revolution.

The assemblage of business interests, power dynamics, and economic structures, as well as the relationships formed between cronies and the military junta, have far-reaching implications for social cohesion and transformative change in Myanmar. Their actions and affiliations exacerbate the challenges faced by the pro-democracy movement, while their influence complicates efforts to bring about a democratic revolution.

The ethno-nationalist: Utilizing the components of the Assemblage Theory, we can assess the evolution of reactionary identities among *Pyusawhti* members and their ramifications in the following manner. The assemblage of ethno-nationalist motivations, personal interests, and survival needs, combined with fear of military retaliation, contributes to the emergence of reactionary identities among *Pyusawhti* members. These heterogeneous elements interact and co-function, shaping the complex nature of reactionary identities within the group.

This assemblage of elements has significant implications for Myanmar's journey towards a democratic revolution and social cohesion. The connections and relationships formed between

Pyusawhti, ethno-nationalist groups, and the military regime create an assemblage that impedes democratic progress and exacerbates societal divisions.

Firstly, the alliance between these groups and the military regime acts as a contagion within the assemblage, spreading resistance to democratic values and practices. This symbiotic relationship hinders the transition to a democratic system and undermines the pro-democracy movement. Secondly, the infiltration of resistance organizations by *Pyusawhti* members serves as an epidemic within the assemblage, eroding trust and cohesion among those fighting for democracy. This contributes to the weakening of the pro-democracy movement and entrenches societal divisions. Thirdly, the actions of *Pyusawhti* and ethno-nationalist groups challenge the unity needed for a successful Civil Disobedience Movement, further complicating efforts to achieve a democratic revolution. Lastly, the establishment of self-governing statelets by ethnic armed groups adds another layer of complexity to the assemblage, making the push for a unified and democratic Myanmar more difficult. This symbiosis of elements within the assemblage exacerbates the challenges faced by the pro-democracy movement.

The assemblage of ethno-nationalist motivations, personal interests, survival needs, and fear of military retaliation, as well as the relationships formed between *Pyusawhti*, ethno-nationalist groups, and the military regime, have profound implications for social cohesion and transformative change in Myanmar. Their actions and affiliations create obstacles to achieving a democratic revolution and complicate efforts to bring about positive change.

In conclusion, when viewed through the lens of the Assemblage Theory, it becomes evident that the complex interplay of reactionary groups in Myanmar, such as reactionary Buddhist monks, cronies, and *Pyusawhti*, forms an assemblage that significantly impedes the nation's progress towards a democratic revolution. The shared motivations of fear and self-interest within this assemblage highlight the urgent need for pro-democracy forces to create and disseminate powerful counter-narratives that address entrenched identities, power dynamics, and offer viable alternative visions for the future.

By dismantling existing narratives perpetuated by reactionary groups, revolutionary forces can challenge the deeply ingrained beliefs and power structures that maintain the status quo. This requires not only exposing the ways these narratives serve the military junta's interests but also providing compelling alternatives that resonate with the broader population.

Furthermore, it is crucial for revolutionary forces to offer tangible and realistic alternatives to the current system, particularly for those whose resistance to change is driven by fear and uncertainty. By addressing concerns related to economic security, social cohesion, and cultural and religious identities, pro-democracy advocates can build bridges with resistant groups and foster a more unified and inclusive push for change.

Ultimately, promoting these counter-narratives is essential in overcoming the obstacles posed by reactionary groups and advancing Myanmar's democratic revolution. By recognizing and addressing the underlying fears and self-interests that fuel resistance to change, pro-democracy forces can work towards dismantling entrenched power structures and pave the way for a more equitable, democratic, and inclusive future for the country.

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Tai Migrants' Access to Land and their Livelihood Security in Northern, Thailand

Nan Mya Oo

Abstract

The Tai, also known as Shan from Myanmar's Shan State, have endured forced migration for several decades due to socio-political disruptions, including forced relocations, armed recruitment, and severe human rights violations. Given Shan State's geographical proximity to northern Thailand, and shared cultural and linguistic heritage with Thai, most Tai migrants have relocated to Thailand in the hope of improving their economic opportunities and living conditions. This study examines historical and contemporary patterns of Tai migration and settlement in a village near the Thai-Myanmar border in Mae Ai district, northernmost Chiang Mai province. Specifically, the paper explores the various mechanisms and processes that have enabled Tai migrants to gain access to land for agricultural production, particularly tea, orange, and other cash crops. Drawing on the theory of access (Ribot & Peluso, 2003), this paper examines a wide range of historical, structural, and relational factors that have shaped Tai migrant's ability to access and benefit from land. Access is structured by kinship and social relations, capital, labor opportunities, hybrid identities, and a mix of informal and state-sanctioned land rights. The study finds that access to land and employment in agriculture is critical to the livelihoods of Tai migrants, providing opportunities for upward social mobility. Despite having no formalized land rights, most Tai migrants in the study village express security over their land tenure arrangements, agricultural-based livelihoods, and legal status as assimilated Tai migrants. The study highlights the significance of the cultural and linguistic similarities between the Tai migrants and the local Thai people, which aid in overcoming land access barriers, establishing livelihoods, and facilitating smoother integration and adaptation processes. At the same time, access to land is a key factor influencing income disparities within the community, indicating that processes for accessing land have also introduced new forms of inclusion and exclusion.

Keywords: Tai Migration, Access to Land, Livelihood Strategy, Northern Thailand

1. Introduction

Tai, also known as Shan, are Myanmar's second-largest ethnic group. Most Tai people live in Shan State, located in eastern Myanmar. Historically, the Tai have spanned a much wider geographical area, including bordering regions of Northern Thailand, Northwest Laos, and the Southwestern Yunnan province of China, which resulted in various kinds of transregional connections and exchanges (Ropharat, 2009). This history of interaction and similarities in language and culture with the Thai distinguishes the Tai from other ethnic groups from Myanmar who have migrated to Thailand over the past several decades (Amporn, 2017). In Thailand, Thai people call Tai "Tai-Yai" (members of the "Greater Tai" ethnic family), while Burmese people call them "Shan" (Amporn, 2017; Ropharat, 2018). For this research, I use the term Tai, as this is their self-identification in my study site, an old established village in a rural borderland area in Mae Ai district, northern Chiang Mai province, which has been a destination for Tai migrants over the past several decades.

This early history of geographical assimilation of Tai is important as it continues to shape local people's perceptions of the border as relational and fluid rather than a fixed boundary line. Before the demarcation of modern borders in the second half of the 19th century, the spatial organization of political power had little to do with territorial boundary lines on a map. Instead, multiple sovereignties between overlords and tributary states created a concept of borders as "a blended region" where people with allegiance to different kingdoms coexisted (Ropharat, 2009). Scholars have noted that in the premodern time, the Thailand and Myanmar cross-border region comprised a zone that contained various settlements under the frontier township. Beyond the limits of these could lie "vast areas of forests and mountains forming a corridor between the two Kingdoms," a border without a boundary line (Thongchai, 1994, p. 75; Pitch, 2007). People in the Thai-Burma borderlands thus occupied a vaguely defined and often shifting 'frontier' (Keyes, 2009), experienced border-crossings as a 'general movement' (Ropharat, 2009), and engaged in dynamic political, socio-economic, and cultural interactions and exchange (Cohen, 2001).

This history continues to shape local people's perceptions of borders in the case study examined in this paper. This is exemplified, for example, by the way, residents in Mae Ai district refer to their borderland villages as being *din kham khuen*, meaning it half belongs to Thailand and half to Myanmar, despite the area being located within Thai national territory and about a 12km distance from the Burmese border.

In the upland agricultural border region known as Loi Khur in Mae Ai district, Chiang Mai Province, older and more recent waves of migrants from Myanmar's Shan State have cocreated a new social and physical space within Thai territory constituted by economic, social, and cultural relations that straddle geopolitical divides. Their strategic use of international borders has enabled Tai migrant farm workers to not only find a space of refuge from political conflict and economic hardships in their homelands but also to access agricultural land and labor opportunities, despite having no formal land rights and facing various limitations in accessing citizenship rights. As explored in this paper, Tai migrants have mobilized various strategies for

accessing land and, in particular, drawn on social relations and the cultural and linguistic similarities with Thai people.

The few studies of rural-rural migration from Myanmar to Thailand have tended to highlight the exploitability of agricultural migrant workers, shaped in large part by their illegality, precarious legal status, and bodily representations of the Tai/Shan as "hard-working" (Sai Latt, 2012; Mortensen, 2024). This research shows that while cheap Tai labor has also been crucial to the economic success of tea, orange, and other agricultural production in the area, access to land and employment in agriculture has also provided opportunities for upward social mobility for some Tai migrant workers, some of whom have become land 'owners' and employers in their own right. Despite having no formalized land rights, many Tai migrants in these older established villages express a level of security over their land tenure arrangements, agricultural-based livelihoods, and legal status as assimilated Tai migrants. At the same time, given the centrality of agriculture to Tai people's livelihoods, access to land has become a key factor influencing income disparities within the community, indicating that processes for accessing land have also introduced new forms of inclusion and exclusion.

This paper draws on the theory of access developed by Ribot and Peluso (2003) to examine the different strategies, mechanisms, and processes by which Tai migrants have accessed land in the study site. Using their definition of access as "the ability to derive benefits from things," as opposed to the "rights to benefits from things," this study examines a wide range of social relationships that have enabled or constrained Tai migrants from benefiting from land. The mechanisms that shape land access processes and relations in the study site are rights-based, structural, and relational-based.

2. Research Site and Methodology

The research site is located within a broad geographical area locally referred to as "Loi Khur," located in Mae Ai, the northernmost district of Chiang Mai Province, Northern Thailand. Loi Khur is named after a mountain that straddles the border between Northern Thailand and Myanmar's Shan State. Around 12 villages with more than 3,000 people have settled on this mountain the upland forested area of Mae Ai district, around 12 kilometers from the Myanmar border. Several ethnic groups live in this area, including Northern Thai (*Khon Muang)*, Tai (Shan), Lahu, Ahka, Tarang (Palaung), and Bamar. Because of the mountainous terrain, border crossing is not easy. Most people cross the border illegally at either Mae Sai, Nong Ouk, or Mae Hong Son.

Research in Loi Khur was conducted in two hamlets in Loi Khur (Moo 1 and Moo 9), where there is the highest concentration of Tai residents. Together, these two hamlets contain more than 400 households or around 1,000 Tai people, including other ethnic groups such as local Thai people, Tarang, Lahu, and a few Burman, about half of whom are Tai migrants.

Specifically, fieldwork was conducted in the two hamlets of Pang Na and Pang Kard, located in Moo 1 and Moo 9, respectively. In these two hamlets, 400 Tai households are concentrated, with 90% of the population being Tai. In the past, Moo 1 and Moo 9 used to be part of the same village, which was established over a hundred years ago. Due to the increased population,

people could no longer fit into one temple, and the village was divided administratively into two. Moo 9 is located in the Mae Ai sub-district, while Moo 1 is part of the Malika sub-district. In this paper, I use the generic term Loi Khur to refer to the settlements in Pan Ho Tard and Pang Nai of Moo 1 and 9, unless otherwise noted.

Local villagers refer to Loi Khur as "Lin Kam Keung" (in Tai language) or "Din Kam Keung" (in Thai), which means "half land" where one side belongs to Myanmar and the other to Thailand. This term suggests that local villagers perceive this borderland area as a fluid and ambiguous frontier zone; however, from the Thailand state's perspective, it is formally located within Thai national territory. Villages in Loi Khur are located within a part of National Park established by the Thai Forestry Department in 2000. The villages are thus on state land under the jurisdiction of the Department of National Parks, Wildlife and Conservation and have no possibility of getting formal titles. However, people have been permitted to continue living in the villages, which predates the establishment of the national park, as long as they do not encroach on the forests. The boundaries of village land (including agricultural land) were marked by boundary posts when the national park boundaries were demarcated in 2000, and the Department of National Parks closely monitors villagers closely to ensure they look after the forests and do not expand their agricultural land.

Fieldwork was conducted over a period of 45 days in June, July, and October 2022. Ethnographic methods were used to collect data, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, informal focus group discussions, and participant observation. A total of 28 interviews were conducted with Tai community leaders, village heads, Thai local administrative authorities, and a former soldier of the Maung Tai Army (MTA), a Shan insurgent group. Interviews focused on the history of village and Tai migration and settlement, village administrative and land use system, perceptions of laws and regulations related to access to land, and livelihood strategies.

Tai migrant men and women spanning different generations were also interviewed, including agricultural workers, namely in tea and orange plantations, land 'owners' and renters, and employers. Discussions centered on people's experiences of migration, working and living conditions, strategies to access land, agricultural and livelihood practices, social relations and cultural integration, challenges and coping strategies, and long-term well-being. To gain perspectives on Tai migrants and their socio-economic and cultural integration into the village, interviews were held with Thais and other villagers involved in nonfarm work, such as social service providers, teachers, small shop owners, and cultural organizers. In addition, the research draws on secondary data based on the review of existing literature from academic papers and reports.

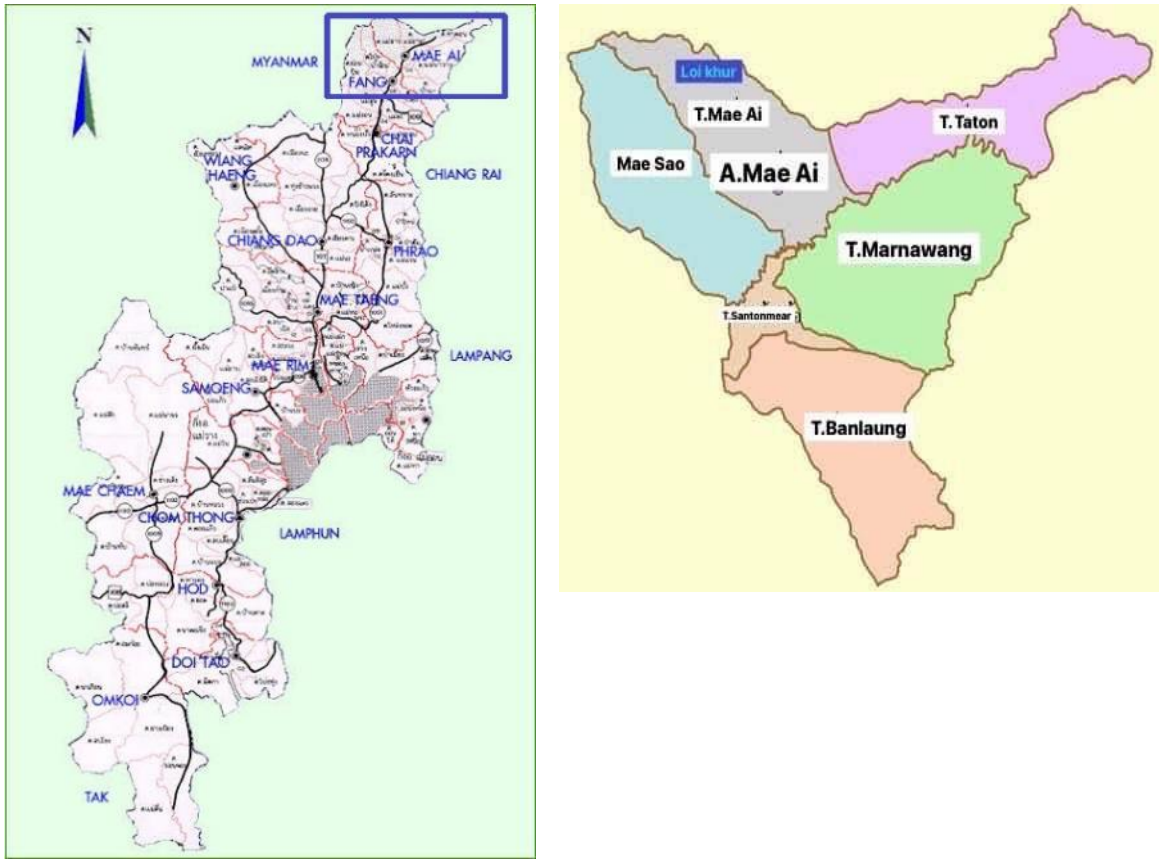

Figure 1: (Left): Location of Mae Ai District in Chiang Mai province, Thailand; (Right): Location of study village in Loi Khur in Mae Ai district, Chiang Mai. Sources: Google Maps and Mae Ai District Community Development Office

3. Research Findings

3.1. Contextualizing Tai Migration and Land-based Livelihood in Loi Khur

According to Amporn (2017), there have been three main waves of Tai migration into Northern Thailand. The first wave was in the early to mid-nineteenth century when Tai migrated to Thailand as traders to conduct economic activities along the borders of Shan State and Northern Thailand. The Tai Yai Study Center (2011) based in Mae Hong Son province also documents that Tai people migrated to that province in 1831 as seasonal agricultural workers, and some people settled there permanently or later moved to other provinces in northern Thailand (Duang-ngern, 2003). The second wave of Tai migrants to Thailand was between the 1950s and the 1980s and primarily involved small-scale seasonal migrants searching for work in northern Thailand. The third wave in the 1990s involved large-scale migration of people from Shan State to northern Thailand due to political conflict, economic crisis, and worsening livelihood insecurities (Amporn, 2017; Tannenbaum, 2009).

Increased militarization of Shan State by the Burmese junta aimed at quelching armed and non-armed resistance groups was accompanied by a forced relocation policy that left thousands of people in Shan State dispossessed of their land and livelihoods (KHRG, 1998). At the same time, the economic boom in Thailand from 1987 to 1996, which increased demand for labor in Thailand and led to wage differentials with its neighbors, acted as a magnetizing force for migrants from Myanmar (Harkins, 2019). In the 1990s and 2000s, unprecedented numbers of Tai migrants entered the northern Thai labor market, becoming the largest group of migrants from Myanmar residing in northern Thailand. It has been estimated that Shan or Tai migrants make up one-sixth of the total population of Chiang Mai Province alone, most of them in Chiang Mai city (Amporn, 2017).

More recently, the military coup on 1st February 2021 and the fighting between ethnic armed groups has become a renewed driver of Tai migrant and refugee exodus, with many displaced individuals seeking protection across the border in provinces such as Mae Hong Son and other northern Thai cities in search for work (Banerjee, 2022).

These waves of Shan migrations to northern Thailand, described by Amporn and others, also reflect Tai migration and settlement patterns in Loi Khur of Mae Ai District. While most Tai have migrated since the 1990s, the Tai village settlements in Loi Khur are well-established and settled over a hundred years ago.

According to the village head in Moo 1, whose grandmother was born in Loi Khur in the period of King Rama V (1853-1910), "Tai people from Keng Tung and other parts of Shan State frequently came the Loi Khur to conduct trading activities and grow tea in Loi Khur." Though initially migrating only on a seasonal basis and returning home after the harvest, since the late 1800s, Tai people began to settle in Loi Khur on a more permanent basis. "*Over a century ago, this area was mainly populated by Tai people, with only a few Khon Maung (local Thai residents) in the Pang Jong area, another hamlet in Moo1*" (Interview with Mae Luang, 25/6/2022).

In the 1980s, Loi Khur became a landing place for Tai ethnic armed groups, including the Mong Tai Army (MTA), up until the time MTA surrendered to the Myanmar government in 1996. Loi Khur was a deep forest, a good area for them to live in. The Tai migrants worked on daily wages in lychee plantations and tea plantations.

Tai migration to Loi Khur increased significantly in the late 1990s and 2000s. According to Tai villagers, over 300 Tai households migrated from Eastern, Northern, and Southern Shan State over this period as a result of armed conflicts and the brutal campaigns by the Burmese military in a bid to stamp out resistance to its rule. Human rights violations, including forced relocations, land grabbing, and the burning down of entire villages during the "Four Cuts" operations, caused them to lose their homes, agricultural lands and livelihoods and seek a new life across the border in Thailand. Unlike many other Tai migrants who went directly to urban areas such as Chiang Mai and Bangkok, the Tai who migrated to Loi Khur were mainly farmers who decided to stay in the countryside, joining established Tai villages where they had family or known contacts and where they worked primarily as agricultural laborers or farmers in tea and fruit orchard plantations. Although there had previously been some flow of people back

and forth across the border, especially during the peak agricultural seasons, this period saw an increase in the number of migrants, who settled permanently, often as entire families. Many Tai migrants felt that agricultural work suited their skills and way of life, as described by one person:

> *When we were in Shan State, we grew rice paddy and groundnut. Here, we continue to work in agriculture because we are used to it. For us, the land is working to support our lives* (Interview with Nang Mu, 18/6/2022).

At the same time, a Thai policy push for rural economic development at that time saw more peripheral areas of Chiang Mai increasingly integrated into the larger Thai economy, including improvements in road and other infrastructure, provision of services, and market-orientated agriculture promoting cash crop production for domestic and export markets. This led many Tai migrant households to experiment with new forms of agricultural production and livelihood strategies to increase their social and economic mobility. It also brought them into greater interaction with Thais and the Thai state.

Tai migrants in Loi Khur have different legal statuses. The older generations of Tai migrants and their offspring – around 20% of Tai migrants in Loi Khur – have assimilated into Thailand, acquiring Thai citizenship, receiving formal education, and working legally. Others have been issued highlander cards, ten-year cards, or hold Myanmar migrant worker cards, which provide some level of security of mobility and livelihoods, including access to formal education and healthcare. However, they are not allowed to apply for government employees such as teachers as they are not Thai citizens. In addition, they do not have the right to receive government welfare support. The generations of Highlander card or 10-year cardholders can apply for Thai citizen cards if their parents settled in Thailand before 1995 (Interview with Mae Luang, 25/ 6/2022). However, newer generations of migrants do not have the same privileges or rights, which affects the kind of work they can get and the conditions of employment, and makes them vulnerable, especially migrants who are not formally registered and are termed 'illegal.'

3.2. Agrarian livelihoods of Tai migrants in Loi Khur

The livelihoods of Tai migrants in Loi Khur are predominately agriculture-based. The primary income source comes from cash crop production, namely tea, but also coffee, orange, mango, and avocado. While several Tai villagers in Loi Khur earn income from non-agricultural work, such as construction, they generally receive lower wages. This indicates that the economy of the Tai migrants is heavily dependent on agriculture, with alternative income sources being less accessible to a significant portion of the Tai population.

There are three general categories of Tai agricultural workers. First, over 70% are smallholder farmers who grow various cash crops on their own landholdings. As examined in the next section, this group has been able to acquire land through various means, and earlier waves of Tai migrants to Loi Khur have particularly benefited from accessing land more easily and at cheaper prices compared to more recent migrants. Most Tai landholders have tea plantations from which they can earn an estimated 115,000 baht per person annually. More recently, many tea farmers with more capital have been switching to orange plantations, which require higher

investments in inputs and labor, but from which higher earnings can be made (an average of 180,000 baht per person per year). To find the market, they contacted orange sellers and made connections with middlemen to buy their products from their farms.

The second group (around 25%) consists of smallholder farmers who grow crops on land rented from others in the village. These are generally poorer families in Loi Khur, although some wealthier families are also renting land to expand their plantation holdings. Most farmers who rent, however, have limited land for cultivation, which forces them to rent land and adds to their expenses. The resulting lack of capital for agricultural investment creates challenges for their income growth.

The third group (around 5%) are those who work as daily agricultural laborers on land that belongs to other people (mainly Thai but also some Tai migrants). This reflects a labor market where not all households have access to land and are instead reliant on daily laborers. The income of these laborers can be uncertain and may not be sufficient to meet their daily needs. On the other hand, working as agricultural laborers on others' plantations has provided an essential pathway for Tai migrant workers to accumulate sufficient capital to purchase their own land in Loi Khur, as discussed further below.

3.3. Land and Livelihoods Intertwine

Tai migrants who settle in Loi Khur have all sought to find ways to access land for agricultural production as it is seen to offer families livelihood security. Aside from providing a crucial income source through the production of cash crops, people with access to land can also grow vegetables for family consumption. The importance of land as a source of food, income, and a means of supporting families through generations is often highlighted by villagers:

> *Land is important because it provides us secure jobs through working on the land. We can plant vegetables and fruits on the land. We do not have to buy from outside; we can plant by ourselves. In our orange plantation, we plant pumpkin, ginger, and other vegetables in the corner in areas safe from pesticides. Land is our life; it is a bridge for our future. I won't sell my land to others. We have been working on this land for a long time. We can eat and live because of this land so that we will keep it for our children* (Interview with Nong Puu, 18/6/2022).

The above quote highlights that people have developed a deep connection to the land they farm. It is not only a means of livelihood but also something that holds cultural, historical, and emotional value. They desire to maintain this connection to the land and pass it to the next generation as a bridge to their future. As noted by another villager, the significance of having land is also crucial in the context of old age and financial security:

> *It's important to have land when we get old, as we still can get money from it. For example, when we need money, we can just go and pick 5 kilos of tea leaves to get money for food. When we are old, we can't work as employees anymore. As we can't go back home to Shan State, having land here is very important for us* (Interview with Pa Kam, 19/6/2022).

While many of the older Tai migrants value land for its productive capacity that sustains livelihoods and provides a sense of belonging, land is also seen as a commodity that can be bought and sold for money, particularly by younger generations that may not want to be farmers:

> *The farms we bought will be given to our children. If they don't work on the land, they may sell to others. It depends on them whether they want to continue farming or not* (Interview with Nang Mu, 20/6/2022).

4. Tai Migrants' Strategies and Mechanisms to Access Land in Loi Khur

Tai migrants have employed several strategies to access land in Loi Khur through different historical periods. The mechanisms and processes that have shaped Tai migrant's access to land or their ability to gain benefits from land are rights-based (involving navigating formal law, informal arrangements as well as forms of illegality) as well as structural and relational. The latter includes factors such as access to capital and markets, labor opportunities, social relations, and social identity that have shaped or influenced Tai migrant's ability to access land.

4.1. Customary Claims to Land by First-Generation Settlers

The first generation of Tai settlers in Loi Khur in the late 1800s and early 1900s acquired land by clearing forests for housing and farming. They followed customary codes that were common across much of mainland Southeast Asia in the premodern period (Yano, 1968; Diepart, 2015; Boutry et al., 2017). While all land belonged to the King, farmers could acquire possession rights to land on the condition that they exercised *de facto* occupancy and cultivation. By clearing, settling on, and cultivating land, farmers could claim land, a practice commonly known as appropriation 'by the plough.' In a context of low demographic pressure, and where the notion of nation-states separated by a clear boundary remained an abstract concept, this regime of land appropriation 'by the plough' allowed farmers important freedom of movement over the territory. As explained by the village head:

> *Over a century ago, people from Keng Tung and other parts of Shan State came to this place easily because there was no border between Shan State and Thailand. Thus, my family and other Tai families came to do business in Loi Khur. They didn't need to purchase the land; they simply came, cleared some trees in the forest, built houses, cleared more land, and began cultivating tea and lychees to support their livelihoods* (Interview with Mae Luang, 25/6/2022).

The history of first-generation Tai migrant settlers in Loi Khur provides important evidence of the early settlement of the Tai in villages that were later territorialized by the Thai state, in particular, the Forest Department which incorporated the villages into a national park. While the creation of the national park in 2000 effectively denies villagers the possibility of attaining formalized land ownership rights, the Thai state nevertheless permits villagers to continue living and cultivating limited areas. This is based in part on the perceived legitimacy of these historical claims and on the basis that they have made these lands 'productive.'

4.2. Military Alliance as a Means of Territorial Control

In the 1980s, members fighting in the Shan insurgent group, Mong Tai Army (MTA), and their families settled in Loi Khur based on a strategic military alliance forged with one of the local Lahu armed groups in the village. According to a former member of the MTA, Loi Khur used to be a Lahu army base. However, a conflict between the two Lahu groups allowed the MTA to settle down in the village because they formed an alliance with one of the armed Lahu groups to attack the other and take over their base. As a result of this alliance, MTA soldiers were allowed to occupy land and build new houses in Loi Khur. These houses were mainly for the wives and children of MTA soldiers as the men spent most of their time in the forest (Interview with Loong Wee, former MTA, 15/6/ 2022).

In the years that followed, Tai migrants who had relatives or personal connections with MTA members enabled them to access land at Loi Khur, either for free or very cheaply. This was particularly the case after the former leader of the MTA, Khun Sa, surrendered to the Myanmar government in 1996. As explained by one villager:

> *My uncle Sai Tun, a former MTA, had a wide piece of land, and he shared with me a small part of his land for free* (Interview with Sai Sarm, 14/6/2022).

4.3. Kinship Networks, Social Relations, and Identity

After the 1990s, an influx of Tai migrants to Loi Khur from Shan state, driven by political instability, displacement, and economic hardship, created a complicated web of social dynamics to secure their base and livelihoods in this new area. Newcomers came from different villages in different parts of Shan State. Traditional customs and communal networks played an essential role, offering ways for land access through kinship ties and community support networks.

Not unlike the relatives of MTA, many Tai migrants to Loi Khur were able to acquire land from their relatives and social networks for free or at a low cost. The current community leader from Moo 1 shared his story of how he came to live in Loi Khur:

> *I came to live here because my teacher was a monk in the village temple. I lived at the temple for three years and went back to Shan State, got married, and brought my family back to settle in this village. We did not have to buy the land. It was given to us for free. This land doesn't have a title, but we can live and work on it, and we can transfer it to our children* (Interview with Sai Kyaw, 15/6/2022).

Thus, Tai migrants in Loi Khur have used their kinship ties and social identity, benefitting from historical and political contexts, taking advantage of low land prices, and capitalizing on the presence of their relatives or social connections to secure access to land.

Tai migrants have also accessed land through their social relationships with local Thai people by engaging in reciprocal cultural exchanges and collaborative community activities. This shows how these interactions, such as helping each other during ceremonies and festivals, have created a strong sense of trust and mutual support between the Tai migrants and local Thai community. This trust, in turn, facilitates the Tai migrants' ability to rent or purchase land from

both local Thai and local Tai individuals, ultimately enabling their integration and settlement within the community.

4.4. Access to Land through Labor

As the village population grew, land prices began to increase and access to capital became a limiting factor in accessing land. Most Tai migrants in Loi Khur first had to accumulate sufficient capital to be able to purchase land. One villager, for example, worked on an orange plantation in Loi Khur for 10 years with his wife and saved some money. However, it was not enough to purchase land, so he went to Southern Thailand to work as a rubber tapper for two years, after which he was able to earn enough money to purchase land in Loi Khur (Interview with Sai Te, 7/7/2022).

The majority of migrants worked in Lor Khur as agricultural laborers picking tea in other people's tea plantations or working in orange and other fruit orchards. Access to these labor opportunities has been mainly through social relations. Labor opportunities have served as a key strategy for the Tai migrants to access land. According to villagers, more than 80% of the Tai migrants have accessed land by first laboring for local Thai people's plantations. By working for Thai employers for several years and being good, honest, and trustworthy workers, many Tai migrants were able to access residential and farmland through informal arrangements and purchases. Many Tai migrants mentioned that accessing land has been relatively easy and that honesty and trustworthiness are the foundation. As noted by one villager:

> *At the beginning, we worked for [a Thai plantation owners] picking tea every day. My boss found me to be a good person, and he asked me if I wanted to buy his tea farm because he and his wife were old and could not take care of the farm anymore. I told him, 'I want to buy the tea farm, but I don't have money.' He replied, 'No problem: you can pay me bit by bit.' We were finally able to pay it off* (Interview with Loong Sa, 18/6/2022).

This shows how Tai migrants with an agricultural background leverage labor connections with local Thai people and their reputation for honesty and trustworthiness to access land for agricultural purposes. It emphasizes the importance of social relationships in the process of gaining land access.

4.5. Renting Agricultural Land

Renting farming land is another common mechanism for Tai migrants to gain access to land for agricultural production and move away from being agricultural laborers on other peoples' land. Around 25% of the Tai migrants rent land from local Thai landowners, a practice typically based on long-standing relationships and mutual support within the community. The stories of individuals like Loong Boon and Pi Twe provide valuable insights into the dynamics of land rental in this community:

> *We rent tea farms for 3,000 baht annually for larger farms and 2,000 baht for smaller farms. There is a verbal agreement between us, which is negotiated every year or every five years. We must pay for the rental fee in advance. The landowners are mostly local Thai people who are retired teachers or government officers whose children do not want*

> *to be farmers. If we can pick tea leaves during the harvest season, we can make at least 40,000 baht a year* (Interview with Loong Boon, 26/6/2022).

Loong Boon's experience illustrates how renting land to farm tea allows him to secure a source of income for his family. Local Thai landowners who have inherited the land but do not actively work on it are willing to lease their land to Tai migrants. The presence of five-year rental agreements enhances predictability for both the landowner and the tenant. For migrant Tai families, income from activities like tea picking is usually sufficient to meet their basic living needs. Additionally, the practice of cultivating vegetables on rented land complements their food and/or income. However, it is important to note that while this income covers basic needs, it may not be enough to fulfill other financial obligations. Loong Boon and his wife have had to get additional employment working on his relative's orange farm, as they need supplementary income to support their daughter's education.

Land rental for orange plantations involves considerably higher financial commitments. Pi Twe pays a rental fee of 36,000 baht per year. He has a five-year agreement with a local Thai landowner, subject to renegotiation at the end of the five years. This flexibility can affect the landowner's decision to renew the rental agreement and the migrants' choice to continue renting. However, like many other land renters, Pi Swe faces restrictions about what he can grow on the land, as he is not allowed to change the type of crop grown on rented land (Interview with Pi Twe, 27/6/2022).

Renting land is a strategy for Tai migrants to gain access to agricultural land, enabling them to secure a source of income for their families. This practice is characterized by clear cost structures and various contractual arrangements, emphasizing the importance of long-term stability and predictability. However, the need for supplementary sources of income, as exemplified by Loong Boon and Pi Twe, reflects the financial challenges that some migrants face and the importance of diversifying their income streams.

4.6. Informal Land Transactions: Plural Institutions and Authorities

Social relations play a key role in accessing land in Loi Khur because all land transactions are conducted on an informal basis among villagers. As Loi Khur villages are on state land under the authority of the National Park Department, buying and selling land is illegal according to Thai law. However, informal land transactions among villagers occurs with the knowledge of Thai authorities and are sanctioned and overseen by local village heads. As such, informal land purchases require some kind of legal documentation and authorization by local village authorities. Older generation Tai migrants have used their children's ID cards because they are Thai citizens, while others use their Highlander cards or 10-year cards to buy land. As explained by a young lady who owns an orange farm:

> *We have an orange plantation of 12 rai. My father's friend informed him about the land, and my father was interested in buying it for us. As I'm Thai, we used my ID card to buy the land. We do not have a land title, but we have selling and buying letters among relatives from the buyer and seller sides to sign in the paper. The government allows us to use this*

> *land for our livelihoods. We are not allowed to sell it, but we just sell it informally to each other within the village* (Interview with Nong Puu, 28/6/2022).

One peculiar finding concerning informal land purchases in this borderland area is that different agreement letters are issued according to the location of the land purchased. This situation applies mainly when land is purchased from local Thai landowners. As explained by one villager, land on the west side of the main road will receive a paper that contains a map (*wai pheun thi*). However, land purchased on the east side of the road receives only an agreement from the village head. The explanation provided is that the road's west side is clearly on Thai territory, while the east side is perceived as a frontier zone that is neither Thailand nor Burma, or both (Interview with Nang Mu, 15/7/2022).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

There is a plurality of institutional arrangements and legitimacies over land tenure arrangements in Loi Khur. One is exercised by the central state and formal law, and the other is based on historical customary claims and more recent informal arrangements legitimized by local village authorities, social consensus, and the recognition of actual land appropriation and use. While villagers in Loi Khur have no formal rights to land as they are located within the national park, the state nevertheless permits villages to continue using the land for residential and livelihood purposes, provided that these areas are not expanded further. This constitutes a pseudo-sanctioning of their rights, albeit one that falls short of formalized legal land rights and where villagers are at the behest of the benevolence and patronage of the Thai state. This hybrid arrangement between statuary and customary rights to land is navigated pragmatically by villagers:

> *The government allows us to use this land for our livelihoods. We are not allowed to sell it, but we just sell it to each other. The forestry officers come yearly to survey and mark the land. We can use the land that we have, but we cannot extend it to the forest. We can work on it forever* (Interview with Nong Puu, 28/6/2022).

> *When I get old and can't farm anymore, my land will be given to my children. I don't need to update the information to the [village] leader. My land is in an area of the protected area (khaed tham kin) where the government allows us to use the land for farming to support our livelihoods. They [national park authorities] do not come to claim or say anything. If my children do not want to farm, they can sell it* (Interview with Nang Lu, 20/06/2022).

Informal land transactions are built largely on trust and relationships, but they are also authorized or sanctioned by village heads and other Thai state institutions. Land transactions also require documents verifying the legalized status of Tai migrants, highlighting that access to land is regulated by a rights-based regime. Moreover, depending on the geographical location, the nature of land purchase agreements can vary, underscoring the intricacies of land acquisition. Tai migrants thus rely on both formal and informal arrangements, navigating between both worlds and in so doing, they create new and hybrid forms of land tenure security.

Is also worth noting that even though villagers in Loi Khur are unable to obtain land titles, the majority of Tai families interviewed feel a sense of security over their land tenure, as evidenced in their plans to pass on the land to their children and expressions of confidence in their ability to cultivate their land "forever." This points to a disconnect between legislative land rights and local perceptions, and foregrounds how tenure security is not just the product of a legalized document but rather produced through the trust engendered in the relations established between local villagers and local institutions that recognize their rights to access and use land.

It is arguably this very context of land informality, which has enabled Tai communities in Loi Khur to continue to access and benefit from land through social relations and in flexible ways. Various studies have shown that land titling creates the conditions for land markets to emerge, leading to land sales and the loss of ownership and control of community land, particularly by poorer households (De Shutter, 2011). Titling can increase socio-economic inequality within communities (Boutthavong et al., 2016) but also through facilitating capture of land by outside elites (Ho & Spoor, 2006). In Loi Khur, the very lack of possibility for land titles has in a way enabled communities to continue accessing land. This is a form of territorial control and a way of keeping land within the community, which has served as a form of social protection mechanism. This challenges conventional views, inspired by Hernando de Soto and promoted by the World Bank, that secure property rights achieved through individual land titles are a key determinant for poverty alleviation and economic development.

Various studies point to how titling may reinforce socio-economic inequality, both within communities (Boutthavong et al,. 2016; Diepart & Sem, 2016; Hutchison, 2008) but also through facilitating the capture of land by outside elites (Green & Baird, 2016; Ho & Spoor, 2006)

According to Ribot and Peluso's theory of access, who can use and benefit from land and resources is affected by several different processes and power dynamics. The fact that villagers can make a living from the land even though they don't have official land titles shows how important social relations and informal agreements are for accessing land. This situation fits with Ribot and Peluso's claim that formal property rights are not the only thing that determines access. Social ties, local customs, and power dynamics also play a role in how people can use resources. This is illustrated in the large number of Tai migrants who have accessed land from their employers by first working as agricultural wage laborers in the tea plantations and fruit orchards of local Thai (and some Tai) landowners. Working as employees over periods of time not only enabled them to earn cash to purchase land in Loi Khur, it also established relations of trust with their employers which was crucial in their ability to purchase land. This also highlights that pathways were available for poorer households to gain access to land through their labor and that social networks have been key to accessing land for the poor.

At the same time, the economic reliance on agriculture for Tai migrants means that access to land is a key factor determining income disparities within the Loi Khur community. Those with landholdings are considered to be better off compared to those who rent land or who work as agricultural laborers with no land. Thus, the processes of land access and acquisition has also created patterns of social differentiation. For example, migrants who settled in Loi Khur earlier, such as those with close relations to the MTA, were able to access larger pieces of land of better

quality and at lower costs, compared those who migrated later. Access to capital has become increasingly important in the ability to access land. Over time, the price of farmland has increased as agricultural land has become scarcer as a result of population growth and the fact that farmland expansion is prohibited by National Park authorities. Patterns of social differentiation have been initiated by land rent capture practices of local Thai and earlier Tai migrants, which pushes more vulnerable migrants into seeking wage labor.

Access to land for Tai migrants settling within local Thai communities is a multifaceted process deeply entwined with social relationships and reciprocal cultural exchanges. These interactions have cultivated trust and mutual support between Tai migrants and the local Thai population, even while unequal power dynamics are embedded in some of these relationships. Whether through leveraging capital by working as agricultural laborers, informal land purchases, or rental arrangements, Tai migrants gain access to land through personal connections with neighbors or friends, solidifying the intricate web of social ties and reciprocity that strengthens their bonds with the local Thai community. This reflects Ribot and Peluso's idea that access is mediated by social identity and the ability to mobilize social relations. The intricate web of social ties and reciprocity not only enables practical assistance but also embeds Tai migrants within the local community, reinforcing their sense of belonging and integration.

Land tenure security is perceived in broader economic, social, and institutional constraints. However, it is also produced through the trust engendered in the relations established between local villagers and the institutions that recognize their rights to access and use land. Despite not having formal land titles, many Tai feel quite secure over their land tenure and have positive prospects for future livelihoods in agriculture. They also feel confident of being able to pass on the land to their children. The land has given Tai migrants a sense of belonging and a cultural attachment to the place.

Indeed, the social and cultural assimilation of the Tai in Loi Khur is significant. The first settlers may not have perceived themselves as 'migrants' due to the absence of a delineated boundary between the Keng Tung and Loi Khur regions. A sense of place was perhaps cemented with the establishment of the Mong Tai Army along the border, which provided access to land for later migrants via kinship and social networks. Loi Khur is perceived to be the legitimate territory and home of the Tai ethnic group. Although they understand the implications of the national border and their residence within Thailand, the local institutional arrangements and village administration structure provide Tai villagers with some rights and a sense of belonging. Tai migrants have assumed the role of community leaders, joining various groups that provide them with village membership that extends beyond their identity as migrants.

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Dark Zomia: Myanmar-Thai Frontier and the Chinese Enclosure

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Abstract

This paper discusses the proliferation of illicit enterprises operated by Chinese syndicates in the Myanmar-Thai border. Far from being a closed enclave, the transnational cyber- scam industry has grown invincibly by weaving together various kinds of networks both within and across the border. Rethinking Scott's notion of shatter zone in the frontier of Southeast Asia, this paper argues that Myanmar's "indigenous Zomia" has increasingly been transformed into what I call "Dark Zomia"—the non-state space of the runaway criminals who evade China's state-making project. As a result, the border region has become a contested terrain within which the "friction of sovereignty" among various state and non-state entities has allowed the zones of illicit industry to thrive.

Keywords: Myanmar-Thai border, Dark Zomia, Chinese Cyber-scam Industry, Friction of Sovereignty

Introduction

Frontier as a concept is often characterized by a dualistic function of a delimitation of territories and as a contact zone which simultaneously sets in motion a physical barrier and offers an alternative way of understanding sovereignty, mobility, exchange, identity and political imaginaries (Ratti, 1993; Saraf, 2020). Scholars of frontier studies situate frontier in an unsettling relationship with the nation-state by conceptualizing frontier as a contesting site for sovereign control over which domination by the regional centers is devoid or uncertain (Kopytoff, 1987; Cons & Eilenberg, 2019).

The idea of frontier as a site of struggle and an effect of centers producing and evading margins forms the basis of James C. Scott's notion of Zomia (Scott, 2009). It is the heuristic term adopted from Willem van Schendel's description of highland terrains in Southeast Asia as a distinctive political and geographic space often neglected by traditional area studies (Van Schendel, 2002). Despite heated debates spurred by Scott's provocative premise of Zomia, the idea has captured the unruly characteristic of Myanmar's highland and mountainous region, the persistence of small societies and cultures as a "state effect," and the agentive adaptation of local livelihood in dealing with state domination. Far from being an archaic phenomenon, the ethnic borderland represents a non-state space, a zone of refuge where people refuse to be

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incorporated into the state-making project despite the efforts of the central state to expropriate and rule them.

Scott's framework of Zomia represents both a geographical space on the edge of the powerful state where the friction of terrain prevents the advancement of the state and a mode of political practice where various cultural strategies such as swidden agriculture, oral communication, and multiple ethnic identifications are deployed to evade state control. However, according to Scott, Zomia regions sustained their autonomy only until the end of the World War II. Post-World War II has seen new "distance demolishing technologies" (Scott, 2009) such as roads and telecommunication employed by the state to bypass hostile terrain and to effectively bring borderland closer to the state, and thus ending the era of the shatter zone and the anarchist spirit of the ethnic Zomian.

In this paper, I would like to rethink Scott's Zomia in the wake of the recent Chinese enclosure in the Burmese-Karen frontier.

Following the critiques regarding the description of Zomia (Formoso, 2010; Gohain, 2019; Jonsson, 2010; Michaud, 2010, 2017; Saxer, Rippa, & Horstmann, 2018), I suggest that there is a need to rescue the notion of Zomia from being just a historical concept that limits itself within the purview of isolated state-ethnic relationship in a pre-WWII period. As other scholars of Zomia have already pointed out, not only has the Zomia space still continued to exist at the edge of the contemporary modern state (Le Tourneau, 2023) but also a type of Zomia has spanned across various social and economic categories that include non-marginal actors such as narcotic kinpins, terrorist organizations, and corporate tycoons (Le Tourneau, 2023; Rippa, 2019). Indeed, in the neoliberal era where some powerful nation-states extend their apparatus transnationally, shatter zones out of reach of the state have even been more pivotal and needed, not only by local dissidents but also by nomadic capitals seeking resource prospects outside state intervention. China and its extraterritorial exercise of control over Chinese citizens, diaspora, minority populations, and especially members of transnational criminal networks represents a case in point. Over the past decade, the movement and expansion of Chinese operated online gambling and scamming economy across the Southeast Asian region and the forceful measures by the Chinese state to suppress such transnational criminal activities have had an immense impact on the borderland in the region. Myanmar's "indigenous Zomia" has increasingly been transformed into/replaced by what I call "Dark Zomia." Dark Zomia is both a site and a process of appropriation, a way in which indigenous space has been remade into a foreign space where the livelihood of people has been radically reconfigured. This kind of Zomia remains a site of an anarchist terrain and a non-state space. But the people of Dark Zomia are no longer marginalized ethnic minorities. These runaway dissidents whose lives reject the confined idea of citizenship that is limited to solely one nation-state are the Chinese syndicate who evades China's state-making projects and dissolve frontier ecologies and social order to pave way for a new form of unruly resource extraction and capital accumulation.

In Dark Zomia, "distance demolishing" technologies (both physical and virtual) are developed not by the state but by the fugitive themselves to create out-of-the-way connectivities and frontier assemblage for online scamming capitalism. In Scott's model of Zomia, friction of terrain—altitudes, elevation, distance from the center are identified as the encumbrances that

separate the uplands from the lowlands and the physical barrier that hinder state access to borderlands. In Dark Zomia, however, although out-of-the way places (Tsing, 1993) might be the key site of making new articulation of territorial rule, what is more important is the friction of sovereignty. This is the transition zone characterized by multiple and overlapping claims to sovereignty that result in the blurring of the boundaries of power and modes of regulation and ultimately impede efforts by the Chinese state to go after its fugitives.

This paper will first discuss the structural conditions that have given rise to Dark Zomia in contemporary Karen-Burmese-Thai borderland. It will then analyze certain strategies of flight that traverse between the realms of legality and illegality, negotiation/co-optation and collusion that involve various state and non-state actors at play. Employing the case studies of the telecom fraud industry in the Shwe Kokko special economic zone and the KK Park on the border between Myanmar and Thailand, this paper will demonstrate how such illicit enterprises have grown invincibly while weaving together various kinds of networks both within and across the border. Despite the attempt by China to crack down on crime, online fraud, and illegal gambling in the Thailand-Myanmar border region, such effort has not been fruitful.

The Rise of the Dark Zomia

Chinese illicit capital that is currently active at the border of Thailand and frontier of Myanmar mostly moved/fled from Chinese state's control and regulations. This kind of capital has relocated into the sphere of what I call "Dark Zomia"— the economic frontier where an obscure regulatory regime is at play in which existing ecologies and social order are deliberately dissolved to pave way for a new form of unruly resource extraction and capital accumulation. I argue that the proliferation of illegal economic activities operated by Chinese capital in Southeast Asia, and in the Myanmar borderland specifically, must not be viewed as an isolated phenomenon of aberrance disconnected to the growing economy in the region. Rather, it should be seen as a response to changing regional and global geopolitics in which the Chinese state is the key actor. Alvin Camba posits that China's overaccumulation crisis has resulted in the movement of two types of capital to the global South. The first type is state-endorsed capital that aims to promulgate the model of development as a means to improve China's inter-state relationship disputes and prevent potential disagreements. The second type is flexible capital, which is private capital with its primary aim to liberate itself from the restrictions placed by the Chinese state (Camba, 2020). Examples of extrication-driven flexible capital includes capital in offshore financial centers, money laundering in the developing world, and investments in illicit sectors such as online gambling, telecommunication fraud business, sex work, and wildlife trade.

Flexible capital originates from several factors, including the Chinese state's inability to fully compel its capital holders, deflation of the Chinese currency, and expanding political centralization and control under Xi Jinping (Camba, 2020, p. 3). One of the flight strategies taken by flexible capital is to move to the global South to extricate itself from the constraints placed on them by the Chinese Communist Party. The aim is to acquire new assets, shares in companies, and citizenship while generating new locations of accumulation and new ways of coordinating production.

Forceful suppression on the gambling industry, money laundering, and violent related crime by the Chinese state both within the country and across the border since 2015 had led many casino enterprises to move to Southeast Asian countries, such as the Philippines and Cambodia whose policies are supportive towards gambling business. However, subsequent pressure from China on both the Philippine and Cambodian governments to close down Chinese-operated gambling businesses resulted in relocation of the Chinese illicit capital to the ethnic Karen's control border area. Partnered with the ethnic Karen armed groups[105] and supported by the Myanmar's military government,[106] massive villagers' land along the Moei River have been confiscated and turned into hubs of online gambling industries. Branded as developmental schemes, several modernization schemes where entertainment business co-exist with illegal activities have been established by different Chinese investors, including the Shwe Kokko New City project, the Saixigang Industrial Zone, and the Huanya International New City project in the Karen-Thai frontier. Before COVID-19, the scale of illicit economy of online gambling in this area was limited to the regional network that targeted both Chinese labor recruitment and customers. However, since the outbreak of the pandemic when online gambling was affected by the closing of borders, the enterprises switched to the scamming industry, which has expanded its sphere of operations globally.[107]

The Criminal Empires

> *Yatai [Shwe Kokko] city is an open city. There are taxi service provided by both Burmese and Chinese drivers. It has a tax system. But KK [Park] is different. It is a closed city. There is no public transportation. Outsiders cannot go in there, unless you have a permission. When you go to work there, you have to show your company ID card to the security at the gate and make a phone call to your company. Someone will come and pick you up* (Ms. Z, an employee at a company at the KK Park).

[105] Colonel Saw Chit Tu, head of the Border Guard Force (BGF) and then Kaern National Army (KNA) is the key person who facilitates the business operation of Chinese projects at the Karen-Burmese-Thai border. He is also the founder and former chairman of Chit Lin Myaing Company, a major conglomerate run by the BGF. Saw Chit Tu was introduced to the Yatai IHG by a military colonel in Naypydaw and began a joint venture project of the Shwe Kokko New City after receiving a down payment of US$300,000. Chit Lin Myaing Company receives 30% of profits gained from the development of Shwe Kokko (Radio Free Asia 2019). Chit Tu is also reported to be connected with the Dongmei Group, led by Chinese triad leader, Wan Kuok-koi in establishing Saixigang in the Karen controlled area.

[106] The Yatai project began in 2017. The Myanmar investment commission approved an area of 180,000 acres (73,000 ha) with a permission of 59 luxury villas on 22.5 acres of land, but the actual construction has far outpaced the permitted development. In fact, gambling operations aimed exclusively at Chinese customers had already been built since the late 1990s and early 2000s along the Chinese border, including in territory under the control of armed group such as the United Wa State Army (UWSA). Since 2009, the gambling industry has expanded drastically especially in the Kokang self-administered zone.

[107] USIP reports that there are more than 30 scamming hubs along the Myanmar-Thai border while nearly 100 along the Chinese Border (USIP 2024).

> *The picture that we saw from the victim's mobile phone shows that there was no daytime or nighttime inside of the building [of KK Park]. It's always daytime with lights, color, and sound. There are all kinds of entertainment—casino, drugs, and sex. Scammers [from all over the world] were busy working in different time zones, luring people in various countries to transfer their money to the mule bank accounts. Everyone must meet the target. Or else, they will be severely punished* (Theerayuth Moopayak, Deputy Superintendent, Mae Sot Provincial Police Office).

Chinese investors are not the first group of people who turned the Southeastern frontier of Myanmar into a space of illicit economy. Prior to the advent of the Chinese runway tycoons, Shwe Kokko and the adjacent frontier used to be known as a cattle smuggling, logging, and gambling area. According to Major Saw Maung Win, the Border Guard Force (BGF) spokesman for the Shwe Kokko project and an assistant to Colonel Saw Chit Thu, the first casino in Shwe Kokko belonged to a Thai entrepreneur who was nicknamed "Sia Khaek" (wealthy Khaek).[108] During the time when Sia Khaek was doing logging business in the area, he built a casino premise that was catered to loggers and business people as an entertainment pastime. The small casino enterprise had several gambling facilities such as slot machines and card tables. Many years later, when all the forests were gone, Sia Khaek sold his casino and moved elsewhere. His casino premise was then torn down.[109] However, other casino industries soon came to replace the old gambling enterprise, which began mushrooming all over the border region. These businesses include Myawaddy Complex, Star Complex, Jack Dragon, Grand Myawaddy, and Sky Complex, owned by Thai, Burmese, and Chinese investors and customers were mainly Thai gamblers.

The notoriety of the area as a gambling hub was probably one of the reasons that attracted the attention of Chinese gambling syndicates, who came to explore the possibility of turning the borderland into a casino city in Mae Sot.[110] Despite the gambling background of the Yaitai IHG chairman and other shareholders, BGF representative, Maung Win believes that Chinese investment in Shwe Kokko is different from the one being developed in the neighborhood. As he stated,

> *The Chinese who came to invest here are different. At Shwe Kokko, we are going to build a new city. But they [the Dong Mei Group and Huanya IHG) emphasize online casino. We want to support the establishment of factories. For example, we grow corns here but we don't have machine [to process corns]. Another industry is rubber. So that we can buy all rubber produced in the Karen state, do the processing, and then sell it abroad*.[111]

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[108] Interview with Saw Maung Win, April 27th, 2022.
[109] Interview with Saw Maung Win, April 27th, 2022.
[110] Although Mae Sot has more advantages than Myawaddy in terms of basic infrastructure, several regulations regarding city zoning and construction of high rise had turned Chinese investors' interest away to Shwe Kokko.
[111] Interview with Saw Maung Win, April 27th, 2022.

Casino industry, as the BGF representative sees it, provides jobs to local people. A casino complex can hire 700-800 local people in the area with reasonable income. There are currently 4,000-5,000 people from Myanmar working in the Shwe Kokko new city, and 1,000 of them work as security guards and are mostly Karen.

However, what Maung Win did not foresee was that since Covid-19, when casino businesses had gone into a recess, most of the runaway economy owned by the Chinese along the Southeastern border of Myanmar had all turned into an internet fraud industry, including the one operated by the Yatai IHG. The scale of the criminal activities also expanded. Statistics from the Mae Sot Provincial Police Office shows that in 2023 alone, there were more than 1,000 illegal immigrants from 38 countries who crossed the Moei River into Mae Sot.[112] Many of these people were victims of human trafficking who were lured into the scam business in the Chinese governed area. Male victims (more than 800 people) were predominant. While the countries of origin are diverse covering various continents, most victims came from Africa.[113] More than 200 victims were Chinese citizens. The alarming number of trafficked victims points to the rapid expansion of telecom fraud and online gambling industries in the area, which correlates with the effects of Covid-19. The rise in jobseekers in Asia and elsewhere due to the lockdown became the perfect opportunity for criminal networks to quickly enlarge their online operations during the pandemic. China's strict travel restrictions had also rendered traffickers to turn to seek online workers from other countries (Wong et al., 2022).

Shwe Kokko and KK Park New Cities have become the two most notorious casinos turned scam cities over the past few years. The first is located in Shwe Kokko, headquarter of BGF in the north of Myawaddy under the concession of Yatai IHG, while the second is close to Maw Hto Talay village, in an area controlled by the Karen National Union (KNU) Brigade 6 in the north of Myawaddy, who rent the area out to the Dong Mei Group. KK Park is ten times larger than the Shwe Kokko city.[114] Yatai town has a population of around 10,000 people while the number of population in the KK park can be as high as 200,000 people. Thai PBS, a Thai media, reports that there are three key shareholders of the Yatai IHG, including She Zhijiang, Ma Dongli, and Zhong Baojia. However, a Thai employee at the KK Park who used to work at the online gambling inside the Shwe Kokko city contends that Yatai IHG has all together eight executives. She Zhijiang is usually referred to as Jiāng zǒng (江总) or Chairman Jiang. These executives, despite being fugitives, live like emperors who have supreme power to rule the area and are often surrounded by 20-30 bodyguards.[115] The arrest of She in Bangkok by the

[112] Interview with Deputy Superintendent, Mae Sot Provincial Police Station, 15 September 2023.
[113] The countries where the victims came from include China, Vietnam, Indonesia, India (106 people), Bangladesh, Nepal, Taiwan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Australia, Canada, USA, Turkey, Denmark, South Africa, Ghana, Madagascar, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Malavi, Kenya (17 people), Ethiopia (141 people), Comoros, Turkey, Morocco, etc.
[114] Interview with Ms. September 19th, 2023.
[115] Interview with Ms. Z. September 19th, 2023. According to Ms. Z, she met all of the executives at the parties held by Yatai IHG. Ms. Z also reports that She Zhijiang, Chairman of Yatai IHG has altogether five wives and seven children living in China, Singapore and Taiwan. Ms. Z claims that she knows this information because one of She's wives happens to be her friend.

Thai police in August 2022 has had no effect on the operation zone as it is now managed by another shareholder, Ma Dongli. There are also several differences between the Yatai's Shwe Kokko city and the KK Park. The former is open to gamblers from outside and is advertised as the biggest casino complex with all kinds of entertainment.[116] The KK Park is, however, a closed city with residency restriction and a high security system, which forbids entry by outsiders. Ms. Z, a young Thai from Mae Sot who works as a personal translator for her employer whom she calls "boss" at the KK 3 explains her travel to work at the company.

> *When I stay home in Mae Sot and my boss calls, I would get a border pass, cross the Bridge No.1 and call the BGF car to pick me up. The transportation costs 2,000 baht ($US 500) and is covered by the company. I work for my boss whose company is located in the KK 3. But I stay in a small villa in the KK 4. I am not allowed to enter the KK 3 and do not know what the company is doing. My job is to provide translation service to my boss when she has to communicate with people at the Thai immigration office to extend her visa, to do financial transaction with banks, and other stuff as well as to do online shopping for her.*[117]

KK Park consists of approximately 80 large and small industrial parks/town (yuánqū, 园区). Apart from the KK group, which comprises KK 1-4, there are also other estates such as Heng Seng (1-4), Dong Feng (东风), Dong Fang Hui (东方汇), Dong Fang Mei (东方美), etc. Some yuánqū are small, consisting of only a couple of buildings while some are large. KK1 is called the Old KK (Lǎo KK), KK 2 – Dong Fong, KK 3-- Jin Zhou, and KK 4 -- Si Ji. Each industrial park has its own investors, which differs from each other. For example, Si Ji is reported to be co-invested by the Kings Roman company from the Golden Triangle SEZ in Laos.[118] Similar to other Chinese cities or SEZs built outside China, KK Park goes by China time, which is 1 hour and 30 minutes ahead of Myanmar. However, the common currency used inside the Park and in Myawaddy is Thai baht. Under strict security regulations, the structure of the KK Park is organized along a hierarchical order categorized by the autonomy to travel in and out of the Park.

Online workers and unskilled labor represent the largest group of people working inside the KK Park but are not permitted to leave the building where they work and live. Many of them are trafficked victims who were lured to work through an online scam. General employees such as Ms. Z are identified with a blue card and their movements are monitored by their managers. Traveling in and out of the Park can be done only through permission from the manager. Managers, who have red cards and wear red scarves, run the companies and are usually free to travel in and out of the premise. Executives play an important role in administering the park, which consists not only of scam businesses but also casino, entertainment such as KTV, restaurants, clothing shops, and so on. Bosses are the owners of the industrial park. It is

[116] There is a widespread rumor that among the gambling customers, there are also undercover Chinese police at work.
[117] Interview with Ms. Z. September 19th, 2023
[118] Interview with Ms. Z. September 19th, 2023. Zhao Wei, however, denied any involvement with the KK Park.

estimated that the number of Sino-Thai who work as translators within the KK Park might be around 2,000 people, which indicates the strategic location of Thailand as the transit site where business transaction is carried out. High salary is the main motivation that drives many young Thai with Chinese language proficiency to work in the KK Park. Ms. Z's salary is 50,000 baht (US$ 1,450). But with other top-ups, she earns 200,000-300,000 baht (US$ 5,800-8,700) monthly while the company pays for housing and other expenses. Both the salary and working conditions are far better than the online gambling job she used to work at the Shwe Kokko City. During that time when she worked at the online casino, she was responsible for communicating with customers and replenishing money with a long 12 working hours shift that went from 9 am to 9 pm, with an hour break in between. There was no holiday or day-off while the salary was only 15,000 baht (US$ 435).

Online scam businesses in the KK Park often work in a larger network beyond its location with multinational outfits and collaborations with local teams to operate the scam economy across the border.[119] In the recruitment process, the Chinese-run telecom and online scams start from hiring a local IT gang to create a fake advertising website for job recruitment. In some circumstances, the telecom fraud company might also hire a local agent to recruit potential workers directly in a village. Once the victim falls into the trap, there will be another local agent who corresponds with the victim, answering the necessary questions, having the contract signed, and arranging for accommodation from the victim's home to Thailand. At an airport in Thailand, another Thai team is responsible for transporting the victim to Mae Sot. At the Mae Sot airport, the victim is picked up by a taxi driver who transports him/her to a local pier before crossing the border to the Shwe Kokko or KK Park. All of these local accomplices usually do not know each other and are paid on a job-by-job basis. Since all the accommodation and traveling expenses are pre-paid by the Chinese company, once the victim arrives at the Shwe Kokko or the KK Park, he or she will automatically fall into a huge debt with the company and are forced to do the online scamming job. If the victim would like to terminate the contract, he or she would have to pay off the debt, which is ten times more than what the victim owed the company. Many of these victims have no choice but to be forced to work for an abusive online scam operation. Some choose to run away from the slave-like working conditions. Two young Chinese male victims from China's Hainan who escaped from the KK Park recount their torturous experience.

> *Around June 10, 2022, an agent names Lin Zhi Long came to the village and persuaded us to work in Laos, saying that it was a high salary job. We traveled to Laos to the Golden Triangle area and were forced to work on an online scam. The job was to lure money from Chinese living abroad, not the Chinese in mainland China. We worked for a while until we could not take it any more so we contacted the same agent. He came to pick us up and transported us to Myanmar. We later realized that we were sold to another company. We traveled by boat to Tachileik and then to Myawaddy in the area called KK Park. The job*

[119] It was reported by Taiwanese authorities that in Southeast Asia, human trafficking operations involve more than 40 local organized crime groups (Wong, Thu, & Lee 2022).

we were forced to do remained the same which was to cheat for money from Chinese living abroad.

They paid us salary for 4,000-5,000 yuan (US$ 560-700) in the first two months. But after that, we no longer received any salary. They would give us 4-5 % from the money we scammed. If we failed, we would be severely punished, starting from running around the building area and then battered. We were forced to work from 8.00 pm. to 8.00 am. Our task was to engage people in a romance scam and lure the victims to transfer money to invest in crypto currency.[120] *The company's name is Zhe Yin. All the employees are Chinese. We decided to escape on February 5, 2023. On the way of escape, we lost our mobile phones and were captured by the first group of [Karen] soldiers before being transferred to the second group [of Karen soldiers] and were then transported across the border [to Thailand].*[121]

Apart from the recruitment network, Chinese criminal syndicates also hire a group of Thai people to open bank accounts for them. Money cheated from the victim will be transferred into a Thai banking account[122] and then continually transferred on to another account until the fifth or sixth bank account before it is exchanged into crypto currency and transferred to a Chinese bank account in China. Thailand thus represents the conduit of not only human trafficking for the online scam industry but also as the network of fraudulent transactions in which Thai banks and their banking services play a crucial role facilitating financial flows. The convenience of financial transactions has also allowed the money to be laundered and then used for non-fraudulent businesses. Ms. Z explains the temporality of the online scam industry.

Most of the time, when Chinese bosses earned enough money, they would close down the business and send their Chinese employees back home. They won't stay long here [the KK Park]. Some who can't go back home due to their criminal record will do "white businesses" in Thailand, opening hot-pot restaurants, selling clothes, doing entertainment business and so on. They will use Thai nominees to open the business for them. But my boss can travel to China with no problem. I also plan to work there [in the KK Park] for 2-3 more years and then I might open a shop in Bangkok, selling imported goods and products from China.[123]

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[120] Thai police made an observation that the cheating story lines vary from one country to another. For Thai victims, the scammer usually fabricate a story of something that the victim has done that violate the law. Indian victims seem to fall into the trap of crypto currency investment, while the Chinese and other Asian victims are often trapped by romance scams. The trafficked online workers are usually provided with training in order to successfully lure the potential victims into trap. Most of the time, male fraudsters would pretend that they are females with fake picture profiles. Interview with the Deputy Superintendent, Mae Sot Provincial Police Station, 15 September 2023.

[121] Interview with Chinese victims on 19 March 2023.

[122] From a police observation, Bank K. seems to be popularly used by the scam industry, perhaps because of its convenient process of mobile application.

[123]Interview with Ms. Z. September 19th, 2023

Beyond an Illicit Enclave: Connections and the Economy of Collusion

The crime hub of Shwe Kokko New City and KK Park along the Myanmar border has often been portrayed by academic and media alike as an enclave — a distinct or autonomous area completely enclosed or isolated within a larger or different governmentally autonomous area. This viewpoint, although it more or less reflects the geographical and political seclusion of Chinese criminal hub, fails to capture the interconnectedness between the illicit enterprises and other licit economy that spills across the border.

I would like to suggest that the emerging market of illicit enterprise has not only been a product of the intersection between legal and illegal activities in the market, but the flourishing of both types of economy have also mutually relied on each other. Since the beginning of the establishment of the New City turned Scam Hub run by Chinese investors, the projects have been directly buttressed by cross-border connections and the economy of collusion by various groups of public and private enterprises, especially in the Thai border town of Mae Sot. Many of the Thai enterprises have in return prospered from the growing of the illicit enterprise through the lump sum of economic exchange.

Po Liang A., a local tycoon in Mae Sot who owns a cargo pier right across Shwe Kokko New City has earned his wealth through decades of cross-border cattle trade and now has extra income from renting land to Yatai as well as ferry crossing fees.

One of the biggest Thai construction material supplier in Mae Sot—the H. Group who also owns a river cargo earns an average of 10 million baht per month from the selling of construction materials to Yatai companies.

Restaurants with delivery services have also made a fortune by catering food to the customers in the casino compounds inside the New Cities. A restaurant owner who is a Yunnanese descendant from Chiang Mai's Chai Prakarn district used to work as a tour guide in Bangkok and decided to move to Mae Sot in order to start a food delivery business, specifically for Chinese customers across the border. But while the overland Yunnanese have enjoyed doing cross-border business with the Chinese in the casino empire, not all the Sino-Thais view such economic collaboration favorable. The former Chairman of the Chamber of Commerce, Tak Province, a Sino-Thai, who has settled in Mae Sot for more than 4 decades, elucidates the difference between the two types of Chinese.

State enterprise such as the Provincial Electricity Authority and leading internet provider firms also treated Shwe Kokko New City and KK Park as prominent customers before the Thai government was asked by China via the Myanmar government to cut off their power supply and internet connection. This was done as a bid to crack down on illegal Chinese businesses in June and July 2023. Mae Sot PEA used to earn approximately 30 million baht per month from the Chinese users across the border prior to the halt of the transborder electricity service.

Friction of Sovereignty

In Dark Zomia, what set up sharp, relatively inflexible limits to the effectiveness of the state is not the friction of terrain as Scott contends, but rather the friction of sovereignty that hinders

the accessibility of the state. The following story markedly illustrates this novel form of friction at the Karen-Burmese-Thai frontier. On November 5, 2023, the Tak Provincial Police issued an order to investigate a claim that a group of police officers from the Provincial Police Region 6 (Mae Sot) was sent across the Thai border to negotiate a raise in protection money with the BGF (KNA) regarding the Chinese living in the Shwe Kokko area. The incident was first reported by the Thai PBS that claimed the demand came after the Myanmar government had suspended border crossing by foreigners except for Thai citizens. At the time, the Chinese government began taking serious measures against the Chinese operated online scamming hub along the Myanmar-Thai border, and thus had put pressure on Myanmar to initiate this suspension. The negotiation, however, failed miserably. Saw Chit Thu was so angry that he threatened to close down the natural border under the control of BGF for three months.

If border control is a quintessential exercise of sovereignty, it is often played out by various actors and through various forms, including bribery, protection fee, and extortion. The above-mentioned story of friction invites scholars of social sciences to rethink the theory of sovereignty. While sovereignty has increasingly been viewed as divisible and reconfigurable, state territory can also be unbundled, and infrastructural power can be expanded across networks and beyond the territory of the state. In so doing, it both de-territorializes existing states and re-territorializes belonging and association among various political entities. As a result of such sovereignty arrangement, we are beginning to witness increasingly complex, multiple, and overlapping hierarchies of sovereignty in which political authority has been rearranged across divergent operational dimensions and spatial scales. Yet, flexible management of sovereignty is also historically contingent and contextually specific, which involves not only the state but also the interaction between state and non-state actors. In the case of the Karen-Burmese-Thai frontier, while different modes of governing segments of the population are at play, what characterizes this zone is not just graduated, disaggregated, or overlapping sovereignty exercised by a state. It is in fact, the constant negotiation and contestation over claims between state and non-state actors. This contributes to what I call, the friction of sovereignty—the rubbing of several forces in their everyday exercise of sovereignty that results in an uneven jumble through which various actors seek to enact or assert control over borders, the movement of money and people, and sovereign right.

The growing of the Chinese online scamming economy in the Dark Zomia has been made possible by taking advantage of the friction of sovereignty and the grammar of governance, which the Chinese scamming investors are keen to learn. While the Myanmar government granted the BGF a certain form of autonomy to control lucrative cross-border trade and taxation and the right to collaborate with Chinese tycoons in exchange for guarding the ethnic resistance group, the military also uses the friction of sovereignty for double-dealing. The military government may play along with China occasionally when they are pressured to eliminate illegal gambling and online scam operations in the border area. In some circumstances, they may transfer the pressure onto the BGF. At the same time, the task of the BGF is to make sure that the overlapping deal-driven sovereignty, although subject to constant fluctuation, work its best to serve all parties' benefit. In this Dark Zomia, the ability to play into the negotiating space of governance is key to the politics of frontier accumulation of capital and the evasion from the reach of the Chinese state. It is this friction of sovereignty that brings into life the

illicit movement and collaboration of scamming economy propelled by various actors involved in the assemblage of illicit capital.

As for the Chinese Zomian, similar to many other borderlanders, the practice of multiple loyalties and multiple citizenships is a common strategy used by members of the gambling and online-scam syndicates to escape control by the state. For these people, citizenship represents resources to maneuver rather than belonging or allegiance to a sovereign state. Such practice of multiple citizenships, however, might not always work with an omnipotent state such as China. Chairman of the Yatai IHG, She Zhijiang, the main agent of the Shwe Kokko New City Project, was prosecuted by the Chinese authority, despite his nationality as Cambodian. She published his statement in the Bangkok Post on August 30, 2023. It was a public appeal of human rights abuse due to forced repatriation to China that was enforced on him by the Chinese government, stating that the extradition is unjust as he is no longer a Chinese citizen (Bangkok Post, 2023). His plea was, however, to no avail.

The Assemblage of Dark Zomia

One of the key characteristics of Dark Zomia is mobility and its ability to deterritorialize and reterritorialize, which are essential for capital accumulation. Connectivity and mobility are thus important principles of the assemblage (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). Organizing flows of power, making inclusions and exclusions, collaborating with both similar and different kinds of networks are carried out by the assemblage to reproduce itself. By doing so, an assemblage of crime might generate a certain kind of territory that hides other possible ways of assembling crime, which engenders different effects (Crockett Thomas, 2020, p. 73). This act of mobility entails deterritorializations or "the line of flight" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

The mobile characteristics of crime assemblage can be found in various areas of Dark Zomia. I argue that the movement of illegal economy among different borders in Myanmar, Thailand, and Laos represents not only a line of flight to evade authorities and conceal the potentially emerging assembling crime but also the possibility of capital accumulation. As shown in various cases, the transfer of capital and labor in criminal activities from one area to the other has been part of the circulating networks of goods and people, which is generally practiced in the online scam industry. Some victims of the online scamming industry are usually sold to another site when the person fails to generate income.

The crime hub in the Myanmar frontier has often been portrayed by academic and media alike as an enclave—a distinct or autonomous area completely enclosed or isolated within a larger or different governmentally autonomous area. This perspective, although it reflects the geographical and political seclusion of Dark Zomia, fails to capture the interconnectedness between the illicit enterprises and other licit economy that spills across the border, and thus it inadequately addresses the question of how illicit activities necessitate the flow of global capital into formal economies regionally and globally.

My study on the Shwe Kokko SEZ and KK Park has found that the economic life of the two scam cities has never been closed or static but open and provisional, constituting the relationship with other economic entities, legal, or otherwise. Since the beginning of the

establishment of the New City turned Scam Hub Projects run by expatriate Chinese investors, infrastructure development inside the projects has been directly buttressed by cross-border connections and the economy of collusion by various groups of public and private enterprises especially in the Thai border town of Mae Sot. Many of the Thai enterprises have prospered from the growing of the illicit enterprises through economic exchange and turning the crime hub into their consumer market. These include cargo pier businesses that provide cross-border transportation of people and goods, construction material suppliers who are behind the fast-growing infrastructure building within the zones, food and goods delivery service that cater goods to customers and workers in the zones, and large retail stores that supply food, drinking water, and grocery products into the zone. It was no surprise that a large transnational retail store in Mae Sot branch made the highest sales among all the branches in the north of Thailand since the arrival of Chinese across the border. Furthermore, state enterprises, such as the Provincial Electricity Authority and leading internet provider firms also treated the two online scam cities as their prominent customers and earned lucrative income from them for many years. Last year, the Thai government was then pressured by China to cut off power supply and internet connection in a bid to crack down on illegal online scamming.

The frontier assemblage of the Dark Zomia also extends globally, weaving together a collection of various actors, events, discursive practice, virtuality and allure, value and violence. All of these elements are drawn into the economy of online fraud. From labor recruitment to skill training, torturing, scamming, laundering, and escaping, these heterogeneous elements coalesce and reshape the terrain while turning the frontier into what Ananya Roy calls *riskscapes* – the transformation of territory by certain technologies of power to manage accumulation and risk (Roy, 2012). Also, this contingent convergence is by no means permanent or fixed but is subject to change, disperse, and realign all the time.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have called to attention the rise of the shadow economy and its transborder society in the interstice of state power in contemporary Myanmar's borderland. It is closely linked with the development of regional and global economy of which China plays a pivotal role. Expanding as well as problematizing Scott's notion of Zomia, I have demonstrated how indigenous Zomia has been replaced by Dark Zomia, while the anarchist history of local livelihood has been rewritten into a story of unruly scamming and gambling. If Zomia represents a way of being and not just a political situation, as some scholar suggested, Dark Zomia represents a palimpsest of a way of being that has been written and rewritten, made and remade, time and again, and often time with violence.

I also propose that Dark Zomia be viewed as one form of frontier assemblages, originating out of contestation and collusion of sovereign and territorial power that goes beyond the global-national or global-local, and ruly-unruly dichotomy. It is the space of a multiplicity of projects and intervention--not a uniform and coherent governance, of overlapping forms of rule—that changes and shifts all the time, and of collaboration and evasion—that allows illicit capital to flow and grow. Similar to Scott's idea of non-state space, contemporary Dark Zomia also brings out the agentive aspect of the frontier where the mobility of capital and maneuver of

connections are key to survival and thriving outside the state surveillance. But unlike Scott's Zomia, the population of the Dark Zomia are not ethnic minorities familiar to anthropologists, but the new generation of Chinese, whose transnational illegal networks and nomadic livelihood, in and outside the state, remain largely unexplored by/unknown to borderland scholarship.

Therefore, the peculiar aspect of Dark Zomia lies not only in its mobility and malleability to evade state power but rather in the ability to [re]assemble and [re]connect with various elements that move in and out of state/licit and non-state/illicit space. As a result, power relations become diffused and highly negotiated, boundaries become blurred, and dark Zomia proliferates, beyond the interstice of the frontier.

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The Cost of Myanmar's Coup d'état and Ongoing Civil War

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Abstract

Will Myanmar's civil war permanently reshape ASEAN's geopolitical, intra-economic, and financial structures, while shattering millions of civilian lives? Despite its critical importance, the economic costs of Myanmar's civil war remain inadequately examined in academic literature and public discourse compared to other conflicts. With no resolution in sight since the military coup on February 1, 2021, Myanmar is descending into a full-scale civil war. This article employs an analytical framework akin to evaluating American civil wars to analyze Myanmar's civil war's economic costs from the military takeover in February 2021 to the end of 2023. The most significant economic losses, however, stem not just from diverted resources but also from the human toll and damage wrought by those resources when used for violence. The central argument posits that even if Myanmar's civil war were to end promptly, the extensive destruction of infrastructure and other losses would necessitate years of recovery and social progress. Crucially, it underscores that civilian populations, not military personnel, must bear the brunt of such devastation. Hence, foremost among imperatives is the establishment of humanitarian passages for safe civilian evacuation and to bring this deadly civil war to a swift and humane conclusion.

Keywords: Myanmar Coup, Economic Burden of Civil War, Opportunity Cost of Civil War, Reversed Development, Spill Over Impact, Authoritarian Economic Apparatus, Social Cost, Humanitarian Crisis

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Introduction

Is the civil war in Myanmar set to permanently alter the geopolitical, economic, and financial structures of ASEAN? Conflict shatters life, health, and living standards, creating a direct causal link between conflict and poverty, as noted by Miguel, Satyanath, and Sergenti (2004, p. 727). The significant death toll is impacting Myanmar's economy profoundly. Three years after the military coup, the effects are not only devastating and extensive but also enduring for Myanmar and its neighbors, through spillover effects such as refugee flows, chaos, and illicit trade in minerals, weapons, and drugs.

This paper examines the economic consequences and cost of Myanmar's prolonged civil war, analyzing costs from the coup on February 1, 2021 to the end of 2023. It uses theoretical frameworks from the American Civil War studies by Coclanis (1996, pp. 163-175) and Goldin and Lewis (1975, pp. 299-326). The uncertainties and risks to Myanmar and neighboring economies are unprecedented. The primary focus of this analysis is significantly biased towards negative outcomes, highlighting Myanmar's devastating economic crisis and enormous costs to its people, a topic that has yet to receive extensive academic attention. While this paper does not fully address the comprehensive overall cost of the Myanmar civil war, it aims to provide a foundation for further research.

The structure of this paper is as follows: Section (1) delves into the diversion of resources and the economic burden imposed by the Myanmar civil war. Section (2) delineates the primary methodological framework and provides an estimate of the economic costs of Myanmar's civil war from February 1, 2021 to Dec 31, 2023. Section (3) examines the macroeconomic framework under authoritarian governance and discusses both the quantifiable and unquantifiable economic, political, social, environmental, and other costs. The study reveals that civil wars lead to substantial GDP per capita losses, have more enduring impacts than interstate conflicts, and that traditional research may have underestimated the long-term economic repercussions of war. The paper argues that there are broader issues beyond the quantifiable costs concerning the economic impacts of the war.

February 1st, 2021, Military Coup

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar's military, the Tatmadaw, staged a coup overthrowing the democratically elected government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, based on unfounded electoral fraud allegations (The New York Times, 2021). This violent reinstatement of military rule led to widespread destruction of economic infrastructure and severe disruption of citizens' lives, marking a return to authoritarianism. Despite the military's use of terror tactics—including mass killings and the burning of villages—to instill fear, its objective to quickly seize government control remains unfulfilled due to persistent resistance from dissidents, armed revolutionaries, and a shadow government (Lee, Sidoti, & Darusman, 2021).

Proponents of Myanmar's civil war often claim it is essential for social progress and for consolidating a military-imposed nationalist ideology (Steinberg, 2021). However, the coup has faced unprecedented resistance from various societal sectors, including ethnic minorities, students, government employees, professionals, and businesspeople - people from all walks of

life (Aljazeera, 2022). It is evident that the Tatmadaw's ultra-nationalist ideology has failed to resonate beyond the confines of the military barracks. Nonetheless, the protracted civil war in Myanmar continues to wreak havoc on the social and economic fabric of the nation.

Since around 1960s, the Myanmar military has consistently displayed flagrant disregard for fundamental human rights, frequently resorting to systematic and cruel violence against civilians. This pattern has persisted for over six decades, targeting numerous ethnic groups such as the Karen, Kachin, Chin, Rakhine, Shan, Rohingya, among others, with complete impunity. Since the 2021 military coup, there has been a notable increase in assassinations and unintended fatalities as the conflict intensifies and both sides remain resolute in their hostility (HRW, 2022).

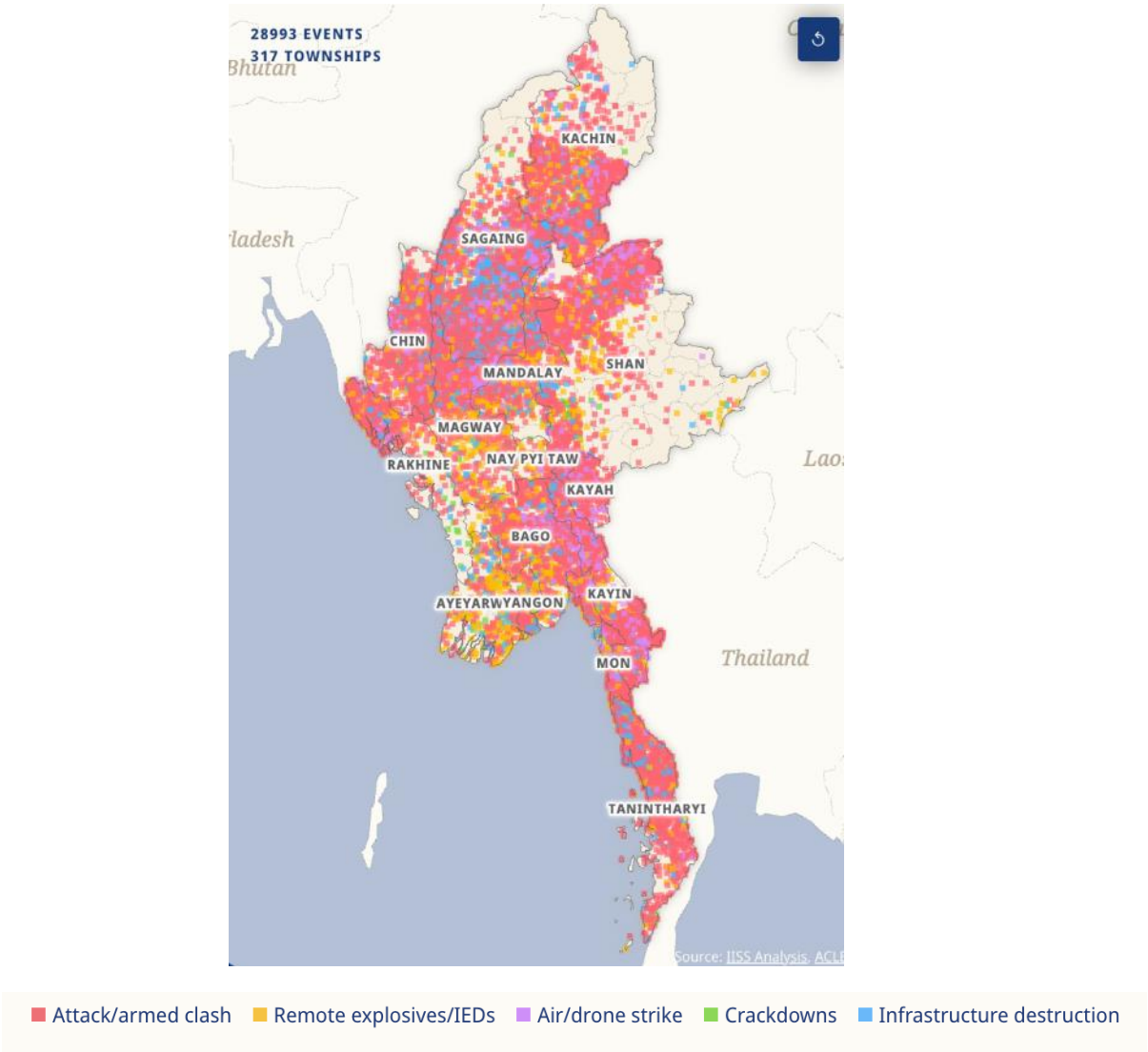
The Dynamic of 2021 Myanmar's Civil Conflict

The civil war in Myanmar unfolds against a backdrop of complex political motivations and aspirations. Resistance forces seek to end militarism and establish a federal democratic framework. In contrast, the Tatmadaw clings to its narrow vision of nationalism, seeing itself as the guardian of national sovereignty. This ideological chasm drives combatants to endure significant costs, viewing them as necessary sacrifices for future reforms.

Almost 317 of Myanmar's 330 townships have experienced conflict as shown in Map 1 (IISS, 2024). Between February 2021 and December 2023, around 28,993 incidents were recorded, with political violence claiming approximately 50,000 civilian and military lives. The Sagaing and Magway regions saw the highest fatalities, while the southeastern region reported 6,500 confirmed deaths, accounting for 20% of overall casualties (ACLED, 2024).

At first glance, Myanmar's internal conflict might be perceived as a dichotomy: the perpetrators and the victims; the military against its citizens. However, the resistance comprises a myriad of actors. Following the coup, the people of Myanmar felt disenfranchised, and their decade of relative freedom and improving quality of life abruptly ended. Under coup leaders, the military and police forces have executed a ruthless assault on civilians with impunity (The Guardian, 2022), committing atrocities like mass murders, bombings of hospitals, systematic rape, and imprisonment of thousands (USIP, 2023). Millions have been displaced. Davies (1962) warns that in such appalling situations, citizens are likely to resort to political violence and insurgency.

As the military's crackdown on protesters escalated into armed conflict, solidarity against the regime gave way to battles with riot police and light infantry, with protesters using makeshift weapons. While coup leaders wield hard power, supported by a few Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs), business elites, and autocratic nations, the opposition includes the National Unity Government (NUG), armed and unarmed dissidents, and various EAOs. Over 400 People's Defense Force (PDF) battalions and hundreds of local defense forces, some emerging as early as April 2021, are scattered across the country. Many have pledged allegiance to the NUG following its call for an uprising in September 2021. These well-armed PDFs collaborate with EAOs in the southeast, though most resistance forces lack firearms (Ye Myo Hein, 2022).



Map 1: Myanmar Conflict Map from Feb 2021 to December 2023

Source: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)

On October 27, an alliance of ethnic minority groups launched coordinated attacks on military posts in northern Shan State, bordering China. These groups seized several towns and border crossings in a meticulously planned operation, aptly named Operation 1027 to mark the date of its commencement. The assaults were unprecedented in their scope, speed, and the sheer number of groups involved, posing a far greater threat to the military junta than the resource-constrained PDF forces' guerrilla warfare. The scale of this new offensive represents the most significant military challenge to the junta's rule, stretching its forces thin across multiple fronts. However, the territorial ambitions of these ethnic groups remained confined to their regions, as there was no coordination with the central Myanmar opposition movement. Were it otherwise, the possibility of toppling the authoritarian junta might have been within reach. The civil war's dynamics thus mirror Myanmar's intricate conflict landscape, populated by numerous actors and entangled in both regional and international implications.

Resources Diversion and Economic Burden of the Myanmar Civil War

The economic burden of war, as Mueller (2013) elucidates, encompasses direct and indirect costs, including the opportunity cost of diverted resources. In Myanmar's ongoing civil war, society diverts the majority of its resources from productive pursuits to violent conflict. The Tatmadaw allocates public funds to military operations, while the resistance acquires war funding through local contribution groups (Crisis Group, 2022). Consequently, Myanmar suffers doubly: resources are lost to productive activity, a phenomenon economists call deadweight loss. This escalates to deadly outcomes as government finances fund troops instead of essential public services like healthcare, education, and civilian safety. While the deadweight loss economic phenomenon merely means unproductive, a nationwide escalation in violence proves deadly.

Myanmar society is forced to gather resources for both sides, hoping for a decisive victory, yet resulting in mutual destruction. Most civil conflict expenses do not return to Myanmar as productive factors; guns and ammunition are sourced from abroad, notably from China, India, Russia and borderlines. The prevalence of firearms within Myanmar erodes civil rights and enables criminal activities to thrive amid chaos, prompting people to flee in response to theft, rape, or murder threats (ICJ, 2022), leading to asset relocation.

Certain limitations and caveats of this research warrant mention. The Tatmadaw seldom discloses precise casualty numbers. Research institutions like ACLED, ISP, and DATA Myanmar rely heavily on local media sources such as Khit Thit Media, Myanmar Labour News, Democratic Voice of Burma, BBC, the Ministry of Defense, and the NUG. The NUG claims opposition forces have killed nearly 20,000 junta soldiers while losing only 2,000 fighters (NUG, 2023). Verifying these figures is challenging; realistic assessments suggest these numbers may be manipulated for propaganda. Nevertheless, due to the lack of more reliable data, researchers of the Myanmar civil war have to rely on these sources.

Methodology

This research primarily utilizes the cost accounting approach to assess the economic repercussions of conflict, which is considered straightforward and direct. This method aggregates the financial values of both direct and indirect expenses incurred during the civil war. Direct costs are sourced from verified public records, press releases, news, and statistical databases. Indirect costs include the destruction of physical capital and the cumulative value of subsequent production losses (Abadie & Gardeazabal, 2010). Additionally, this paper utilizes a human capital approach (Boag, 1916) to evaluate the war's impact on Myanmar's GDP and other economic indicators. Myanmar's civil war costs require speculative assumptions, interpolations, extrapolations, and grappling with the ethical dilemma of assigning monetary value to human life.

Alternative methods for estimating war costs, such as counterfactual assessments and regression models, involve theoretical considerations like discounting future values, and are often critiqued for their assumptions (Goldin & Lewis, 1975). Therefore, the direct estimate, which sums all costs and losses associated with the conflict, is preferable for calculating the

economic impact of Myanmar's civil war. This method accounts for expenditures by both the Tatmadaw and opposition forces, as well as the loss of human and material capital during combat, given the limited comprehensive data.

Additionally, comparing GDP before and after the onset of the conflict provides an opportunity cost estimate. This method approximates expected GDP levels had there been no revolution or war, projecting outcomes to at least pre-war levels, assuming zero growth in Myanmar's GDP for the sake of simplicity.

The Direct and Indirect Cost of Myanmar's Civil War

The direct economic toll of Myanmar's civil war includes all military expenditures by the Tatmadaw and opposition forces, along with quantifiable losses of human lives and physical infrastructure. The direct economic cost of conflict is defined as a reduction in output from a stable state, incorporating human casualties and infrastructure destruction but excluding intangible costs like suffering and heightened uncertainty (Collier et al., 2003).

Significant economic losses arise not only from the diversion of resources but also from the destruction caused by violence. This includes the devastation of public infrastructure and over 86,000 civilian residences (ISP, 2023). Resistance forces have targeted vital communication networks, including telecommunications, electricity grids, highways, and bridges (Davis, 2023; IISS, 2023). Additionally, Tatmadaw troops have destroyed homes, schools, and healthcare facilities (Abuza, 2023). Given infrastructure's critical role in economic development (Canning & Pedroni, 1999), Myanmar faces severe economic repercussions from these losses.

Estimating the Tatmadaw's costs is relatively straightforward, but reliable data for the resistance forces is scarce. This study provides estimates based on the available information. Despite the conflict, both Tatmadaw and the opposition are part of the same nation, suggesting their combined military budgets reflect the nation's total war cost. The opposition's estimated budget is approximately $150 million (Radio Free Asia, 2023; Moses & Mulakala, 2023), while the Tatmadaw's budgets for 2021, 2022, and 2023 were $2.10 billion, $1.78 billion, and $2.70 billion, respectively (Knoema Data, 2022; The Irrawaddy, 2023). These figures, especially for the resistance, are approximations and subject to uncertainty, including local donations and support from Myanmar migrant workers.

However, most indirect cost data, such as rising poverty, instability costs, business disruptions, immediate food shortages for 16 million people, collapsing healthcare and education systems, the emergence of a large black-market economy, the rise of corruption, rent-seeking, elitism, cronyism, and future interest and borrowing costs, are beyond the reach of this paper. Because calculating war costs solely based on capital damage and military spending neglects additional economic repercussions and the broader impacts of instability and commercial risks (Goldin & Lewis, 1975), moreover, it should also include intangible costs like immobility and psychological trauma (African Union, 2006). On the other hand, this analysis does not cover the broader disruptive effects and spillover impacts on neighboring countries.

Opportunity Cost of Myanmar's Civil War

Opportunity cost, defined as the value forfeited when selecting a particular option (Buchanan, 1991), underscores the significant impact of Myanmar's prolonged civil war on its real GDP (Figure 1). In this context, this paper focuses on annual GDP per capita income as the primary indicator of current economic conditions, owing to its near universal availability rather than overarching theoretical considerations.

However, a simple addition of direct and indirect costs is inadequate, and an opportunity cost framework based on GDP differentials is necessary. Conflict typically reduces GDP per capita, resulting in lower production and consumption compared to non-conflict-affected nations. This decline is due to reduced labor and total factor productivity, depletion of physical and human capital, insufficient new capital investment, and lower gains from domestic and international trade (Collier, 1999).

Figure 1 illustrates a comparative analysis of Myanmar's projected GDP growth rates under two distinct scenarios: with a coup and without a coup. To estimate the cumulative output loss from 2021 to 2023, the approach values deviations in actual real GDP from a hypothetical trend that would have been achieved in the absence of conflict. This methodology assumes that the pre-war resource allocation was efficient and that the conflict disrupts this equilibrium primarily through resource diversion or destruction. Short-term output declines during Myanmar's civil war stem from the immediate diversion, depletion, and destruction of essential resources, while long-term losses hinge on the pace at which the economy can recover its pre-war growth trajectory through resource reallocation. These reallocation adjustments, even if fully reversible in the future, incur deadweight and irretrievable losses (Schiavo-Campo & Jud, 2005).

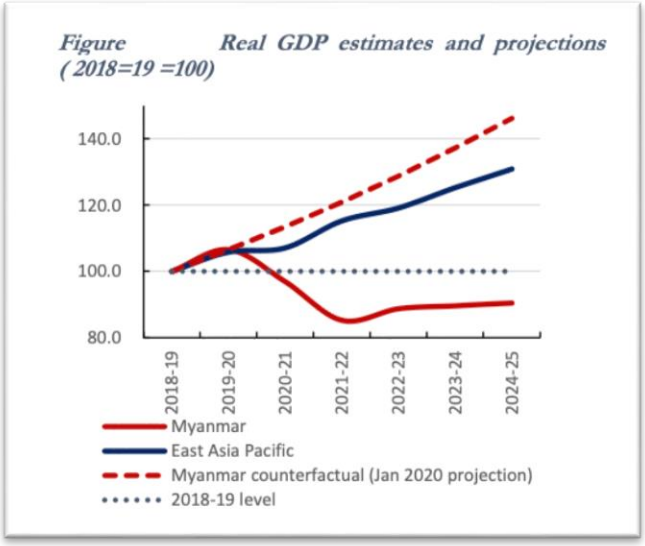


Figure 1: Projected Differential in GDP Growth Rates:
Scenario Analysis of Coup vs. No-Coup Condition
Source: World Bank (2024)

Calculating the Cost of the Myanmar Civil War

Due to the severe limitations of data availability and the secrecy of Myanmar civil war actors, only a broad range of cost estimates are possible. Employing a civil war accounting framework and considering varying levels of conflict intensity spanning from February 2021 to June 2023, the output loss from the Myanmar civil war can be estimated between US$26 and US$ 27 billion (as shown in Tables 1 and 2).

This estimate encompasses direct war expenditures attributed to both parties involved, the consequential loss of human capital, the destruction of civilian infrastructure and property, costs related to humanitarian aid efforts, and an assessment of opportunity costs associated with foregone economic activities.

Table 1: The Cost of Civil War in Myanmar (From 2021 Feb 1 to 2023 Dec 31)

The Direct and Indirect Costs of Civil War in Myanmar	USD (Million)
Tatmadaw's Military Expenditure [a]	6,580.00
EAOs' War Expenditure[b]	150.00
PDF Forces Own Expenditure[c]	50.00
NUG's War Expenditure[d]	150.00
Human Capital Loss[e]	1517.00
Destruction of Civilian Properties[f]	645.00
Destruction of Public Infrastructures[g]	300.00
(roads, bridges, Electricity grids, schools,	-
hospitals)	-
Humanitarian Aid Cost[g]	764.00
Totals	10,156.00

Table 2: The loss from overall economy, GDP

The Opportunity Cost of Civil War in Myanmar	USD (Million)
Opportunity cost (the loss GDP 2020 - 2022)[h]	16,030.00

Sources: Trading economics, World Bank, The Irrawaddy, UNOCHA, UNHCR, Bangkok Post, the Institute for Strategy and Policy – Myanmar, FRONTIER, ACLED, Asia Time, Statista

[a] Tatmadaw expenditures are based on three years of military operations spanning 2021, 2022, and 2023 (up to the end of December). According to published data, the Tatmadaw's budget

allocations are substantial, amounting to US$2.10 billion in 2021, US$1.78 billion in 2022, and US$2.70 billion in 2023. In contrast, the opposition appears to operate with a significantly smaller budget. [For further details, see StratNews Global's article, https://stratnewsglobal.com/articles/myanmars-corrupt-air-force-gets-big-budget-raise-as-airstrikes-escalate/)

[b] It would be unreasonable to exclude Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) expenses when estimating the cost of Myanmar's civil war, despite some EAOs having fought the Tatmadaw for over 70 years. This study assumes the following parameters: the timeline from February 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023, with approximately 20 EAO groups comprising around 80,000 professional soldiers. However, only four of these groups appear to be actively engaged in the conflict during this period. According to ACLED data (2024), EAOs engaged in nearly 3,000 significant battles against the Tatmadaw. These battles have been larger and more significant than the guerrilla warfare conducted by the People's Defense Force (PDF). A conservative estimate for the cost of these engagements, including the overall welfare of the 80,000 troops—covering uniforms, meals, ammunition, training, medication, and other necessities—amounts to USD$150 million, with potential expenditures reaching as high as USD$1 to 2 billion.

[c] Resistance fighters, particularly the People's Defense Forces (PDFs), endorsed by the National Unity Government (NUG) and operating locally, have mobilized substantial domestic and international funds to sustain their campaign against the junta. Unlike established ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that rely on regional taxes and other incomes, PDFs predominantly utilize online crowdfunding. Since February 1, 2021, to December 31, 2023, approximately 500 PDF groups comprising around 65,000 soldiers engaged in more than 10,000 violent clashes with the Tatmadaw, as documented by ACLED (2024). Basic food costs for these soldiers alone exceed USD $21 million annually, assuming a daily expense of USD $1 per person. Self-sourced funding, excluding support from the shadow government, is conservatively estimated at USD $50 million. Concurrently, the NUG has mobilized significant resources, amassing over USD $150 million during the same period. Funding streams include online bond sales, divestment of military-owned real estate, gem mining rights sales, taxation, donations, initiatives like Dragonfly, the establishment of the Digital Myanmar Kyat (DMMK), sales of Spring Lottery tickets, and other revenue-generating projects (Crisis Group, 2023; Abuza, 2023).

[d] Another dimension of the costs associated with Civil War fatalities is derived from the projected wage rates of those who perished. This calculation is aggregated over successive years. The hypothetical earnings for the deceased are estimated using weighted averages of the prevailing minimum wages as of 2023, amounting to MMK 5,800 per day (approximately USD 2.77 (2023 rate)). According to ACLED data from 2024, the civil war claimed over 50,000 lives.

[e] Violent riots following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar led to the destruction of at least 86,000 buildings, including religious sites, with 24,138 structures incinerated in the first half of 2023 alone, constituting about 30% of the total. Construction costs for a basic house range between 10,000,000 MMK (USD 3,000) and 50,000,000 MMK (USD 15,000), unadjusted for inflation, as per ISP-Myanmar (2024).

[f] Throughout the Myanmar civil war, as reported by Davis (2023), there has been extensive destruction of economic infrastructure, including bridges, electricity grids, water infrastructure, educational and health facilities, as well as communication towers and networks. Such destruction has led to diminished productivity and revenue generation. The broader socioeconomic impacts on health, politics, technology, society, the economy, and education are profound. While precise data on the extent of infrastructure destruction is beyond the scope of this study, a conservative estimate of the damage is placed at USD 300 million, with potential reconstruction costs exceeding USD 1 billion nationwide.

[g] Since the military coup on February 1, 2021, the people of Myanmar have faced unprecedented political, economic, human rights, and humanitarian crises. By 2023, nearly half of the population is anticipated to be living in poverty, erasing developmental gains achieved since 2012. The number of individuals fleeing conflict and experiencing reduced coping capacities surged significantly in 2022 and 2023, reaching 1.5 million by early 2023. Since the onset of the coup, millions have been displaced, culminating in a total of 3.1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) by December 2023, with continued displacement expected in 2024. This analysis relies solely on data from OCHA (2023), notwithstanding potential contributions from local aid organizations.

[h] In assessing the opportunity cost of the Myanmar coup, this paper considers only the GDP variances between 2020 and 2022 (Statista, 2024). However, as previously mentioned, numerous other opportunity costs exist, some of which can be monetarily quantified, while a significant portion remains exceedingly difficult to measure (see No. 6 and Table 3 for further details).

Macro-Economic Framework under Authoritarian Governance

Development in Reverse and Resuming Authoritarian Economic Apparatus

Civil wars are known for their extensive economic, social, and environmental repercussions, often surpassing those of international conflicts due to large-scale displacement, substantial casualties, and the displacement of millions of refugees (Collier, 1999; Janus & Riera-Crichton, 2015). The economic losses and opportunity costs associated with civil wars are indeed profound (Besley & Persson, 2009), particularly evident in Myanmar.

Following the coup, Myanmar's political economy has regressed sharply from a period of democratic transition and economic liberalization (2011-2020), characterized by unprecedented GDP growth and substantial increases in real per capita income (World Bank, 2022). The military junta has reinstated authoritarian economic practices, consolidating control over economic decision-making processes and diverging markedly from recent market-driven approaches (Turnell, 2023). Myanmar's economy now confronts significant challenges, with economic activities subdued amidst persistent conflict, heightened macroeconomic volatility, and an inhospitable business climate.

Myanmar's hard-earned capitalist economy, which began to gain momentum from 2012 to 2020, was largely governed by free-market mechanisms and a floating exchange regime, with

minimal government interference in economic decisions. In stark contrast to Thailand's military coup leaders, who typically delegate economic management to technocrats, Myanmar's junta-led planning cabinet exerts direct control over the economy. This includes imposing restrictions on imports, dictating production methods, controlling access to electricity, regulating foreign currency allocations, and managing fuel imports and distribution. Consequently, Myanmar's economy has been transformed into an instrument of authoritarian rule, prioritizing 'power and control' over 'societal needs.'

Institutional and Economic Disruptions with Inexperienced Leadership

The coup plotters in Myanmar, lacking economic expertise, have sparked rampant inflation. Their rejection of economic ideology and market principles, combined with a disdain for academically trained specialists—many of whom were imprisoned or dismissed—led to reliance on policymakers with minimal economic training. The cabinet notably lacks economists, and neither the Central Bank president nor its board members have significant economic credentials (The Economist, 2023). Inflation remains high, driven by escalating food and fuel prices and the kyat's depreciation affecting imported goods. Instead of addressing these issues with macroeconomic tools, the junta's economic cabinet has targeted business entrepreneurs, accusing them of greed-induced price hikes. This reflects the military generals' fundamental lack of understanding of market forces.

Even in the short-term, the junta's authoritarian governance is set to profoundly impact Myanmar's institutional framework and economic policies. The effectiveness of critical economic institutions such as central banks, finance ministries, tax authorities, and commercial courts has been markedly diminished. The resulting institutional and economic disruptions are proving far more costly than mere physical capital destruction in Myanmar's conflict.

Moreover, the erosion of economic fundamentals under military rule has facilitated the growth of a robust black market for currency exchange and informal trade networks. These operate under patronage systems linking military and state elites with favored businesses, further undermining economic stability. Consequently, investment levels have dwindled, currency shortages have intensified, agricultural productivity has declined, and trade flows have been constrained, compounding Myanmar's economic challenges.

Economic Sanctions, Excessive Money Printing, and the Introduction of High-Denomination Banknotes

The imposition of economic sanctions by multiple states following the military coup has prompted Myanmar's junta to adopt reactive measures. In response to new sanctions imposed by the United States in late June 2023, targeting institutions such as the Myanmar Foreign Trade Bank (MFTB), Myanmar Investment and Commercial Bank (MICB), and the Ministry of Defense, the regime has resorted to increased money printing and diversification of currencies away from the US dollar to currencies like the Thai Baht, Chinese Yuan, and Russian Ruble (USA Government Press Release, 2023). Furthermore, on July 31, 2023, the junta-controlled CBM introduced new 20,000 kyat banknotes, doubling the denomination from the previous highest of 10,000 kyats, leading to heightened inflationary concerns and

exacerbating fears of economic instability among businesses and citizens (Bank Note World, 2023).

Amendments to the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM) regulations now grant the junta sweeping powers to monitor all bank deposits, accounts, and safe deposit boxes (Central Bank of Myanmar, 2022). One stark example of arbitrary economic policy enacted to counter currency shortages was CBM's sudden directive requiring conversion from foreign currency to Kyats within a 24-hour period, causing confusion among businesses, exporters, importers, foreign experts, and investment firms (The Irrawaddy, 2022). This move was a desperate bid by CBM to stem foreign currency outflows and exert full authoritarian control over the economy, though it did not work.

Revenue Extraction and Authoritarian Control

As Myanmar's conflict intensifies, the Junta faces severe resource constraints, prompting heightened revenue extraction measures from the population. These measures include increased communication and internet taxes, compulsory conversion of US dollar deposits at below-market rates, stricter controls on imports and exports, and mandatory conversion of foreign workers' remittances (VOA, 2022; Mizzima, 2023).

Concurrently, in the last quarter of 2023, a coordinated warfare effort by three ethnic armed militias, known as the Three Brotherhood Alliance, significantly challenged the authoritarian regime and the Tatmadaw's territorial control. Trade has suffered markedly, primarily due to disruptions at key land border posts with China, Thailand, and India. Excluding natural gas, land border exports plummeted by 44 percent, while manufactured exports, including garments and natural gas, also saw substantial declines. Imports through land borders halved, constituting 71 percent of the overall reduction in imports (World Bank, 2023). In recent assessments, Myanmar has ranked among the world's most hazardous countries for conducting business, teetering on the brink of economic collapse due to its authoritarian governance model (VOA, 2022).

Currency Depreciation and Black-Market Growth

Since the February 2021 coup, the kyat's value has continued to fall against the US dollar, despite the Central Bank of Myanmar fixing the exchange rate at 2,100 kyats per US dollar. Even as global inflation rises due to Russia's war on Ukraine, the kyat's value continues to depreciate against the US dollar. Consequently, Myanmar's industries have been severely impacted by the economic shock of the coup. The actual market value is almost half of this official rate, leading to a large illegal dollar trade and a thriving black market. The CBM's revocation of many currency-exchange licenses, intended to restrict dollar exchange and outflow, has inadvertently expanded the black market, as no one trades at the CBM's rate. The disparity between the official fixed reference rate and the parallel market rate becomes wider and wider (Figure 2). The presence of multiple exchange rates between the official reference rate and the market rate has resulted in persistent foreign currency shortages at non-market rates. Severe capital restrictions, import limitations, excessive money printing, and an unrealistically high exchange rate have further eroded trust in the administration's economic competence.

Capital Flight and Investor Aversion

Capital flight and investor aversion plague Myanmar due to deficient market fundamentals such as inadequate security, law enforcement, and basic infrastructure. Despite the junta's pursuit of deals with China for infrastructure projects and potential future arrangements with Russia using currencies like the Thai Baht, Russian Ruble, and Chinese Yuan, the ongoing need for US dollars remains critical, particularly for military procurements (South China Morning Post, 2023). However, these initiatives often fail to yield substantial economic benefits due to pervasive corruption and rent-seeking practices. Amid these challenges, affluent Myanmar citizens seek to safeguard their assets by investing in real estate abroad, exemplified by purchases of condominiums in Bangkok, Thailand (Kanana Katharangsiporn, 2023).

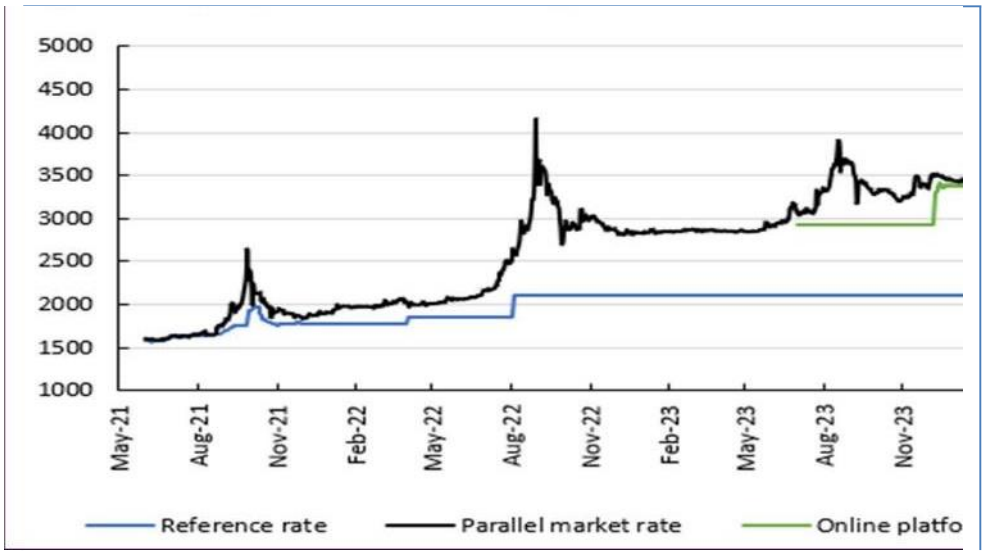


Figure 2: Kyat depreciation and foreign currency shortages have persisted

Source: World Bank (2024)

Table 3: Forecast of Selected Macroeconomic Indicators (2019-2025)
Source: World Bank (2024)

Economic Landscape and Macroeconomic Crisis

Selected Macroeconomic Indicators (annual percent change unless indicated otherwise)

	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25F
Real GDP growth, at constant factor prices	6.6	(9.0)	(12.0)	4.0	1.0	1.0
Agriculture	2.2	(5.7)	(12.8)	(2.2)	2.0	2.4
Industry	8.0	(11.8)	(8.2)	8.0	0.0	1.4
Services	7.8	(8.4)	(14.7)	3.9	1.3	0.1
CPI inflation, year average	9.1	2.3	9.6	27.2	26.5	18.0
Trade balance (% of GDP)	(5.6)	(2.9)	(2.4)	(5.5)	(4.8)	(4.6)
Current account balance (% of GDP)	(1.8)	(0.4)	(2.4)	(3.1)	**(3.7)**	**(3.6)**
Fiscal balance (% of GDP)	(6.2)	(7.5)	(4.7)	(3.3)	**(5.7)**	**(6.1)**
- Revenue (% of GDP)	22.3	16.3	22.7	19.8	**18.6**	**19.1**
- Expenditure (% of GD)	28.6	23.8	27.4	26.2	**24.3**	**25.2**
Public debt (% of GDP)	42.3	54.6	61.5	62.6	**61.5**	**63.0**

Note: 2015 based: April-March fiscal year
Source: World Bank Staff estimates

Myanmar's current economic landscape is marked by unpredictability, opaque decision-making processes, and centralized authorities wielding increased discretionary powers. This reversal has stalled the country's economic progress, prioritizing control over economic efficiency and stability (World Bank, 2022). As shown in Table 3, the impact on service industries, especially retail trade, looms large. Manufacturing continues to struggle with electricity shortages, scarce foreign currency, and restricted access to imports, worsened by a decline in energy production. Agricultural activity in lower Myanmar remains stable, mostly untouched by conflict, while central regions like Sagaing and Bago suffer greatly. Disruptions in land border trade were severe for importers and exporters, who now seek alternative routes.

The macroeconomic crisis in Myanmar is severe, exacerbated by resource extraction by both sides in the civil conflict to fund their operations. The military administration, with control over the Central Bank, state assets, and significant influence over the private sector, maintains a substantial economic advantage despite strong political resistance and external pressures. Nevertheless, challenges persist due to economic sanctions, depleted foreign reserves, the profound shock of the coup, and economic mismanagement by the junta. These authoritarian economic policies have compounded difficulties in sustaining economic stability and deepened the overall economic malaise (Crisis Group, 2022).

Economic Impact on the People: The Absurdity of Living in Myanmar

Daily Realities and Economic Crisis of Myanmar People

The civil war in Myanmar has plunged the country into a severe economic crisis, characterized by plummeting incomes, widespread inflation, soaring prices of essential goods and fuel, acute electricity shortages, and limited access to cash. These factors have exacerbated food insecurity, particularly affecting the economically disadvantaged who lack savings. Movement restrictions and ongoing insecurity have forced vulnerable populations to prioritize the acquisition of basic necessities, which are increasingly scarce, significantly compromising their safety, well-being, and dignity.

In regions such as Chin State, Rakhine State, Kachin State, and the Kalay Region, essential household commodity prices have skyrocketed, in some cases tripling to quintupling since the coup, rendering many food items unaffordable. Widespread job losses due to the conflict have driven many to sell off assets as a coping mechanism. The World Food Program estimates that approximately 15.2 million people, or about 25% of Myanmar's population, are at risk of food insecurity, with half of the population now living below the poverty line (World Bank, 2023; WFP, 2022).

The coup has led to a significant devaluation of the kyat, driving foreign exchange rates to unprecedented highs (Frontier, 2022). This has sharply increased costs for production inputs, imports, and fuel, exacerbating economic hardships that have become entrenched over the past three years and inflicting lasting damage on industries, businesses, and consumers, especially those already grappling with the fallout of the civil war. By late 2022, 36.9% of households and by mid-2023, 42.1% of households resorted to asset sales to cope with income shocks,

including productive assets like livestock and income sources such as motorcycles and boats, raising the risk of prolonged poverty (UNDP, 2023).

Extreme Electricity Shortages, Factory Closures, and Unemployment

Under the mismanagement of the military coup leaders, Myanmar faces severe electricity shortages, with major cities like Yangon and Mandalay receiving only 2-3 hours of electricity per day (VOA, 2022). This severe shortage has significantly increased production costs and restricted fundamental economic activities. Businesses now rely heavily on generators for electricity, rendering operations prohibitively expensive. Rising costs of supplies and plummeting market demand have forced some factories to shut down, resulting in massive layoffs. The International Labour Organization estimates that over 1.6 million workers have been laid off (ILO, 2021), marking the most significant job losses in Myanmar's history. Workers, losing confidence, have returned to their villages, adding financial pressure to rural families. Many may eventually seek low-wage jobs in neighboring countries such as Thailand, China, Singapore, and Malaysia (The Irrawaddy, 2022). The aggregate shocks of the coup have inflicted immense damage on businesses, households, and individual incomes, compounding the existential threats faced by the population.

The Social and Humanitarian Crisis of Myanmar's Civil War

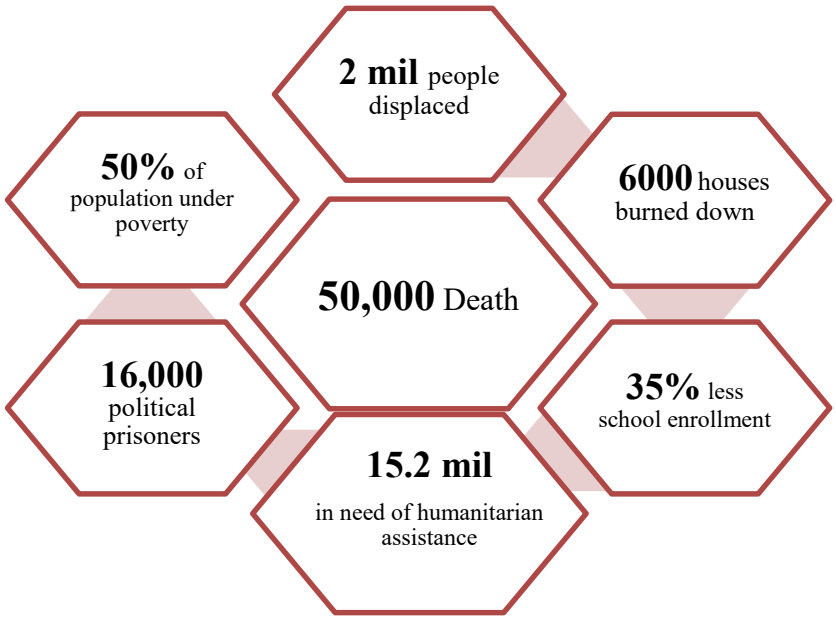


Figure 3: Social and Humanitarian Crisis of Myanmar's civil War
Sources: AAPP (2023), ISP Data (2023), ACLDE (2023), UNHCR (2023), WFP (2023), UNDP (2023), OCHA (2024)

Destruction of Infrastructure, Burning Houses, and Looting

The conflict in Myanmar has resulted in extensive destruction of infrastructure, severely limiting access to essential goods. The destruction of roads and bridges, especially in border and remote areas, has made it challenging for residents to obtain basic necessities like rice, exacerbating food insecurity. As shown in figure 3, since the military coup in 2021, over 86,000

village homes have been destroyed by explosions and arson, with reports of soldiers looting motorcycles, bicycles, furniture, and food supplies (ACLED, 2023). Livestock has also been targeted, either stolen, slaughtered, or deliberately burned alive, instilling fear among the population.

Strategic Supply Cuts, Communication Outages, and Their Impact

One of the coup leaders' key strategies involves cutting off essential supplies such as food and medicine as well as internet and mobile data services. Consequently, internet and communication outages frequently follow intensified military raids on villages (Myanmar Now, 2022). The Global Center for Responsibility to Protect notes that these disruptions severely limit information availability across the country (GCR2P, 2023). The coup plotters have mandated telecom operators to cease service indefinitely in areas of military operations, while tripling the price of mobile data nationwide (The Japan Times, 2022). Although internet access has been partially restored in military-controlled regions like Yangon and Mandalay, outages and blockages persist in anti-junta strongholds. As of September 2022, 54 of the country's 330 townships remained without internet (Myanmar Now, 2022).

The severe impact of prolonged communication disruptions is acutely felt by the most vulnerable. Firstly, these disruptions hinder access to medical assistance. Secondly, they complicate the transportation and distribution of essential goods such as medicine and food, as drivers are unable to ascertain the safety of travel routes. Thirdly, these disruptions have far-reaching economic consequences due to the complex interdependence between infrastructure, communications, electricity, and the effectiveness of the division of labor.

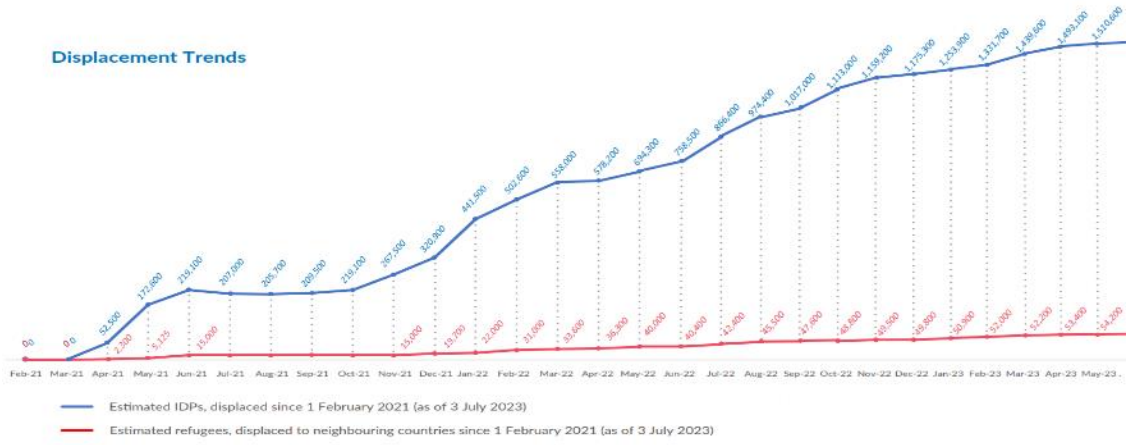


Figure 4: Displacement Trend
Source: UNOCHA, 2023

Humanitarian Impact: Civilian Casualties and Displacement

The most immediate and tragic outcomes of the civil war in Myanmar have been the loss of lives and the displacement of its populace. Conflict escalation has heightened the risks of societal disintegration, straining public services and safety nets amidst economic turmoil. The

displacement trend is rising, as shown in Figure 4. UNOCHA reports an urgent need for assistance for approximately 15.2 million people affected by ongoing clashes and targeted attacks, which have devastated communities across Myanmar. The conflict has forced over 2 million people into displacement, particularly impacting regions like northwest Myanmar (Sagaing, Magway, Chin) and the southeast (Kayin, Kayah, Shan). Displaced populations face acute shortages of essential supplies, including food, healthcare, shelter, water, and sanitation. Vulnerable groups such as women, children, and persons with disabilities are disproportionately affected, facing heightened risks of exploitation and abuse. Children endure violence, recruitment into armed groups, sexual violence, and arbitrary detention. Despite the severity of the crisis, international aid to Myanmar remains insufficient, with funding covering less than 30% of the required humanitarian response, highlighting critical gaps compared to similar global crises (UNOCHA, 2023).

Institutional and Developmental Challenges

The Myanmar civil war exacerbates existing developmental challenges, with profound implications for stability and socio-economic well-being. According to the INFORM Risk Index (2023), Myanmar ranks high for hazards and conflict exposure, underscoring institutional and developmental shortcomings exacerbated by widespread poverty and inequality. Developmental setbacks, compounded by widespread poverty and inequality, further hinder effective crisis management and recovery efforts. These factors impede effective crisis management and recovery efforts, compounding the humanitarian crisis.

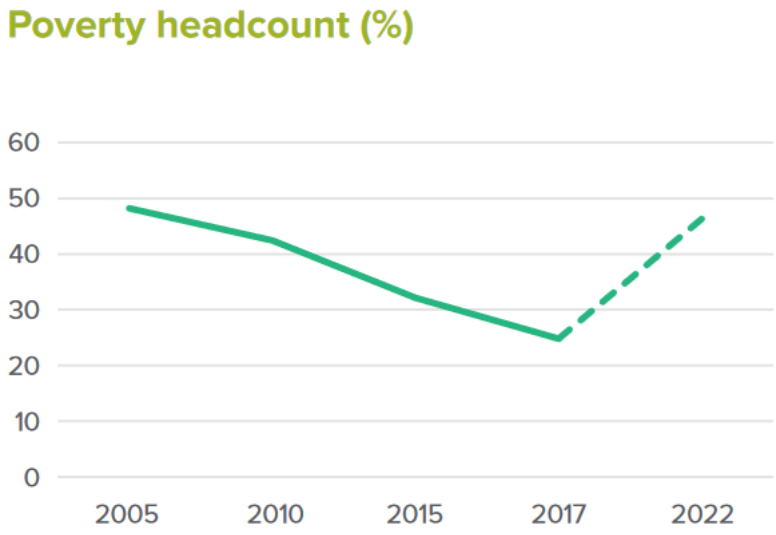


Figure 5: Myanmar's Poverty Trend Coming Back to 2005 level in 2023
Source: UNDP, 2023

Opportunity Costs and Other Costs of Myanmar's Civil War

Opportunity Costs

Myanmar's civil war exacts a heavy toll, combining economic losses with profound psychological impacts. The conflict's economic impact, detailed in Table 3, reveals costs

extending beyond direct expenditures to include substantial opportunity costs. Estimates indicate these encompass up to 50% of annual GDP, reflecting the extensive societal and economic disruptions wrought by violence rather than merely increased military spending.

Had Myanmar avoided the military coup and subsequent civil war, economists speculate the country could have experienced robust economic growth under the National League for Democracy (NLD). The opportunity costs of the conflict are thus significant, representing foregone investments - war dollars in alternative sectors and developmental strides that could have propelled Myanmar's economy forward.

Psychological Costs of Myanmar's Civil War

Psychologically, Myanmar's civil war has exacerbated a broad mental health crisis, extending beyond immediate conflict-related deaths, with pervasive effects including PTSD, anxiety, and depression among its populace. These conditions, exacerbated by poverty and instability, pose long-term challenges to social well-being and require sustained humanitarian intervention and mental health support (Lim et al., 2022). Fear, instability, and insecurity further compound mental anguish, eroding overall well-being. Addressing these multifaceted challenges demands comprehensive strategies to rebuild social cohesion, support mental health recovery, and mitigate the enduring impacts of conflict on Myanmar's population.

The Cost of Eroded Civil Rights

Myanmar's civil war has not only inflicted economic repercussions but has also profoundly disrupted its societal and institutional fabric. Under the military junta's rule, sweeping changes to the legal framework have been used to suppress dissent and curtail civil liberties, creating an atmosphere of fear and coercion (Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2022). Amendments to the Penal Code, notably Section 505, have been instrumental in prosecuting critics of the coup and stifling civil disobedience movements (Human Rights Watch, 2021). Moreover, colonial-era laws have been revived to enforce stringent measures like mandatory guest registration and warrantless searches, further undermining personal freedoms (Human Rights Watch, 2021).

The Electronic Transactions Law has also been wielded to regulate online discourse and censor social media, targeting millions of users to suppress dissent and restrict freedom of expression (Mizzima, 2021). These legislative maneuvers illustrate the junta's strategy to consolidate power through coercive measures, systematically eroding civil liberties and controlling information dissemination. As international scrutiny intensifies, addressing these repressive actions is imperative for safeguarding human rights and advancing Myanmar towards a democratic future.

The Cost on Education and Healthcare

Myanmar's military takeover has profoundly disrupted both the education and healthcare systems since February 2021, exacerbating existing challenges and creating new ones nationwide. The educational sector has been severely affected, with a significant portion of students—up to 30-40%—unable to continue their studies due to increased insecurity and logistical difficulties (Jones et al., 2022). The recruitment of youth into armed groups and the

destruction of school infrastructure have further disrupted educational continuity, while widespread trauma and stress among students have hindered their academic focus and aspirations amidst ongoing instability.

Similarly, the healthcare system has suffered gravely, with healthcare workers involved in civil disobedience facing persecution and imprisonment, severely depleting the workforce and compromising service delivery (Sarli, D'Apice, & Cecchi, 2023; Insecurity Insight, 2023). This has increased health risks and inflated healthcare costs, contributing to a rise in deaths from untreated medical conditions. Inflation-driven private healthcare services are unaffordable for many, exacerbating disparities in access and prompting Myanmar nationals to seek medical care abroad, further straining regional resources and escalating cross-border tensions.

Environmental Impact of Myanmar's Military Coup

Myanmar's natural resources, including minerals, precious stones, forests, and oil and gas, have long been subject to state-sanctioned exploitation, leading to environmental degradation and human rights abuses (Kyed & Chambers, 2023). Since the 2021 military coup, civil society organizations advocating sustainable policies have been silenced or exiled, weakening regulatory oversight (Kyed & Chambers, 2023). The regime's targeting of critics of environmentally damaging practices and corrupt projects has further eroded oversight, leaving communities vulnerable to the impacts of extractive practices on land rights, environments, and livelihoods.

Myanmar's vulnerability to extreme weather events, exacerbated by climate change, poses additional challenges such as heatwaves, floods, cyclones, droughts, and rising sea levels (Global Climate Risk Index, 2021). These stresses aggravate agricultural difficulties and land scarcity, worsened by regulatory gaps post-coup.

Spillover Impacts of Myanmar's Military Coup

Neighboring nations bordering Myanmar are grappling with significant spillover effects stemming from refugee influxes, health crises, societal upheaval, and the illicit trade of minerals, weapons, and drugs. Myanmar's recent history of military coups and ongoing civil conflict has exacerbated regional instability and disorder, extending beyond its borders. The current situation under General Min Aung Hlaing's regime represents an unprecedented escalation.

Increased Drug Trafficking and Security Challenges

Since February 1, 2021, the Myanmar-Thai, Myanmar-China, and Myanmar-India border regions have seen a surge in drug trafficking. The post-coup civil war and fiscal constraints have severely reduced Myanmar's narcotics enforcement capacity, giving traffickers unprecedented freedom (Reed, 2021). This surge threatens regional stability and security, undermining long-term development efforts.

(As of Dec 2023)	
Physical Cost	• Over 50,000 individuals killed (both parties) • More than 20,000 individuals detained • Thousands injured • Over 38,000 residences incinerated by military forces • Over 1.6 million individuals have lost their jobs • Extensive destruction of infrastructure • More than 3 million individuals displaced • Severely reduced mobility • Increased costs of veteran care and disability services
Psychological Cost	• Moral Degradation • Insecurity • Fear • Suicidal ideation • Risk of Mentally challenged • Risk of Subside • Post-traumatic stress disorder
Direct Economic Cost	• 30% Shrank Economy and counting • Loss of International Investments (FDI) • Soaring Unemployment • Hyper Inflation • Economic Sanctions • Banking Crisis • Raised National Debt • Doubled or quadrupled commodity prices • Investors Leaving Myanmar • Inflow and outflow of foreign currency restrictions • Many SMEs collapsed • Surmounting War Expenses (Tatmadaw, PDFs, EAOs) • Electricity Shortages

Indirect Cost	• GDP losses • Raising Poverty • Food Shortages for 16 million people • Almost Collapsing Health Care system • Crippled Education system • Emergent of large black-market economy • The rise of Corruption, rent seeking, elitism, cronyism • Future cost on the borrowing • Future interest on war borrowing • Large Black market
Social and Political Costs	• Serious human rights and civil liberty violations • Rape, torture, arrest, killings and burning civilian houses with impunity • Tremendous increase in surveillance, and racial profiling • Weaponising Laws Against citizens • Media and Communication restrictions • Reduced availability of doctors and medical care • Less school enrollment • Shortage of teachers • Shortage of government staff • More cases of robbery and theft
Environmental Costs	• More trees cut down • Over-exploitation of natural resources • Collapse of regulatory and environmental oversight institutions • Frequency of heatwaves, floods, cyclones, droughts, and rising sea levels
Spill Over Impact on neighboring countries	• Illicit Trade • Borderline chaos • Borderline gun trade • Drug trade • Human Trafficking • Refugee inflows • Economic Burden

Table 4: The Economic Burden of Feb 2021 Coup & Conflicts (As of Dec 2023)

Economic and Social Consequences for Neighboring Nations

Myanmar's crisis has profound economic impacts on neighboring countries, including reduced border economic activity. While some positive movements, like skilled labor migration and

asset transfers from vulnerable populations, have occurred, overall economic strain and social disruptions persist. Refugee presence from Myanmar has strained resources and infrastructure in host countries, exacerbating socio-economic challenges. Therefore, the imperative lies not only in quantifying economic losses but also in comprehensively addressing the socio-political and environmental dimensions of this protracted crisis.

Conclusion

As of December 2023, Myanmar's civil war has inflicted an estimated economic toll ranging between USD $27 billion and USD $37 billion, with ongoing escalation. Table 4 highlights additional dimensions crucial for a comprehensive assessment of the coup's total economic burden. This study emphasizes the disproportionate impact on non-combatants, particularly rural villagers lacking agency in conflict resolution. Beyond physical infrastructure, civil war profoundly undermines societal economic fabric and erodes foundational social capital, notably trust among stakeholders. Following the coup, Myanmar's economic policies underwent a reset by the Junta, including a shift from a floating to a fixed exchange rate reminiscent of past authoritarian regimes. The Tatmadaw's governing apparatus became the primary source of the country's dysfunctional economy, with the military exercising excessive control over economic policy as "they see fit."

However, the resultant lack of confidence in the market, economy, and governing regime has plunged Myanmar's industrial sectors into crisis. Amidst dwindling foreign exchange reserves, economic sanctions, civil strife, and administrative inefficiencies, demand has plummeted while the cost and availability of raw materials and imports have soared dramatically. The military's fiscal challenges, exacerbated by excessive spending on military operations, have further strained its ability to sustain essential market functions such as electricity and fuel supply. As a result, the coup leaders are no longer capable of ensuring essential infrastructure for daily market operations, such as reliable electricity and safe logistic routes, thereby imposing prolonged strains and extreme high prices on businesses operating within the country. These pressures are expected to persist, placing additional burdens on businesses operating within Myanmar for years to come. Furthermore, Myanmar's military upheaval has heightened regional instability, casting shadows over regional security, economic stability, and future development prospects.

Looking ahead, the Junta may contemplate a partial election as a potential solution in 2025, yet this path risks deepening national disintegration rather than serve as a political resolution. Economically, its objectives are clear: it seeks centralized control to consolidate power rather than address societal needs. To mitigate the economic fallout from the coup, leaders may resort to short-term measures such as issuing bonds and excessive money printing. However, these actions are likely to exacerbate long-term economic challenges, including high inflation, diminished trust, increased costs for inputs and imports, reduced productivity, and an overall detrimental impact on the economy. Simultaneously, Myanmar's military is strategically aligning with nations like China, Russia, and India. Meanwhile, numerous businesses have collapsed, and many others teeter on the brink of closure.

Should the civil war and economic mismanagement persist, Myanmar's economy risks regressing to the developmental standards of the old junta era from 2000 to 2010, potentially slipping back into the category of least-developed nations with rampant poverty. Even if the civil war were to cease promptly and democratic processes were restored, the profound impacts of infrastructure destruction and other losses are so immense that the road to recovery and social advancement would likely span many years. Moreover, the enduring costs of the war would burden future generations, accumulating long after the conflict concluded.

Recommendations

- As a result of Myanmar's civil war, its reverberations now stretch across neighboring countries, reshaping ASEAN's international dynamics. Foremost among imperatives is the establishment of humanitarian corridors for safe civilian evacuation and aid delivery—a critical parallel endeavor to stop such a civil war. At a bare minimum, safe evacuation routes should be provided for civilians who are being forced to flee the worsening situation. Myanmar urgently requires access to these essential humanitarian passages.
- Three years have passed since Myanmar's crisis first erupted, yet the civil war shows no signs of resolution; its toll on ordinary lives is ever deepening. Amidst such enduring suffering, a radical shift of world leaders and negotiators is urgently needed—not to exacerbate this spiral of death and destruction but to bring it to a swift and humane conclusion. Myanmar is seriously in need of a stakeholder dialogue at home and committed engagement from the international community and regional players. This demands inclusive engagement of all stakeholders, resolute diplomacy, unwavering accountability, steps towards de-escalation, and a united front of robust multilateral cooperation.

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