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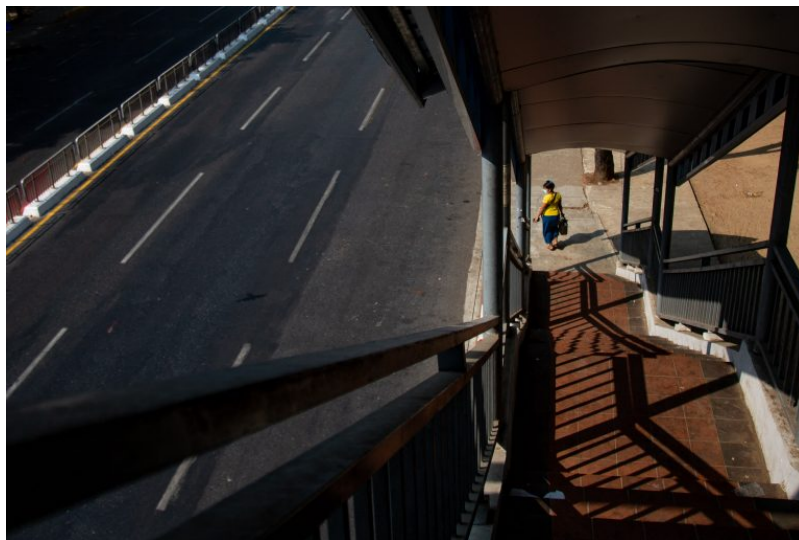
Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific

Myanmar's civil disobedience movement is built on decades of struggle

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Two months after Myanmar's coup, the country's civil disobedience movement is awe-inspiring in its resilience against vicious military crackdowns. According to Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, as of 28 March, 459 people have been killed and 2559 arrested, charged or sentenced. Despite this heavy price, the civil disobedience movement's effectiveness is unprecedented. But its unity is not solely due to the current crisis, widespread hatred for the Myanmar military (Tatmadaw) or the advent of digital technologies.



The success of today's civil disobedience movement comes from decades of behind-the-scenes activism to build a multi-ethnic civil society and an independent media under military dictatorship — well before the democratisation process began just over a decade ago. The expertise and infrastructure built by media veterans covering earlier crackdowns, including ethnic nationality media and the forging of international alliances, is the base upon which the current flow of accurate information and analysis depends. This work is rarely acknowledged in international media accounts of the current situation, which often focus on the newest technologies.

Platforms like Facebook and Twitter are instrumental in allowing the people of Myanmar to coordinate and communicate with each other and the outside world. Digital technologies and social media provide foreign journalists immediate access to accurate information and more nuanced updates from Myanmar analysts than they themselves would be able to make. Social media sites are key 'weapons' in Myanmar's current struggle, facilitating strategies such as the Social Punishment campaign that shames and ostracises family members and supporters of the Tatmadaw.

Facebook responded to the crisis with a ban on all military-linked accounts. But even Facebook's reaction is the result of years of work by local civil society organisations to push the company to address the dangerous spread of misinformation. This was especially acute during the attacks on the country's Muslim Rohingyas.

Massive protests in 1988 and the crackdown that followed caused thousands of dissident students to flee to the country's border areas, where exile media were first established. While the movement was never solely ethnic majority Burman in its make-up, this was the first time many Burman students met ethnic 'insurgents'. Many ethnic minority peoples in the border areas had also never before met Burmans who were not soldiers they needed to fear. Key alliances were forged and strengthened over the ensuing decades.

Echoes of this same realisation have emerged in the 2021 post-coup period. Rohingya and other ethnic nationality groups quickly joined protests against the coup, despite a long struggle for recognition by the National League for Democracy (NLD) for their own suffering at the hands of the Tatmadaw. On social media, young protestors began to recognise and publicly apologise for their previous lack of empathy for the suffering of these minority groups. These sentiments have gone viral. The divide-and-rule strategy used in 1988 is today being challenged on a much broader scale.

When Myanmar's much-celebrated political opening began in 2011, its exiled media moved cautiously to return. But these media and independent media inside the country had already been pushing for decades for greater freedom of expression. That historical knowledge is playing a vital role in the current conflict, as older generations share their experiences of previous crackdowns, repressive rule and imprisonment. The tactics used by today's protestors and dissident hackers are direct descendants of the post-1988 underground communication system.

Media and civil society groups led by 1988 generation leaders of all ethnicities were among the first to publicly raise concerns about the NLD's governing strategies. Many were bitterly disappointed and angered that crackdowns on media and other groups were worse under the NLD than under its predecessor, the military-backed Thein Sein government. A few expressed outrage at the NLD's silence over the military's inhumane treatment of the Rohingya, and over-simplified coverage of the issue by international journalists.

While the coup does provide a clear common enemy in the Tatmadaw, the insights gained prior to this tumultuous period will undoubtedly have an impact beyond the current crisis. Groups such as Progressive Voice, Athan, the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, Action Committee for Democracy Development and Generation Wave will continue this anti-authoritarian, anti-militarisation critique regardless of the outcome of the current crisis.

Gen Z activists appear the most energetic and resilient in the face of direct attacks, but they are drawing from and supported by a long history of networking and capacity-building that makes this movement for democratisation a game-changer. The civil disobedience movement's multi-ethnic and international alliances are also merging with transnational protest movements. Young activists from Myanmar, Hong Kong, Thailand, Taiwan and other Asian countries, dubbed the Milk Tea Alliance, are posing a direct challenge to regional authoritarianism.

Still, this is not a Twitter or Facebook revolution. This is what democracy movements look like in the digital age, built upon a historical foundation of struggle. This may not be your parent's revolution, but it is an extension of it, as some children of 1988 generation activists make clear. This collective historical wisdom is the foundation of Myanmar's resilient civil disobedience movement today. Continued support for civil society, including independent media, is the best hope for democratic change.

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