



Issue Brief

Post-Coup Situation of Myanmar with a special focus on the Impact on Youth and Women

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History of Myanmar Coup d'état

Myanmar gained independence in 1948 but soon fell under military control. After U Nu's government collapsed in 1962, General Ne Win established a socialist dictatorship. Though a semi-democratic government emerged in 2011, the military retained power. In 2021, the Tatmadaw ousted the National League for Democracy (NLD), claiming electoral fraud, sparking protests and a brutal crackdown. The country now faces severe repression, economic collapse, and a worsening humanitarian crisis.

Challenges Faced by the Youth

The people of Myanmar are facing challenges on various fronts, and especially youth are more vulnerable because of the propaganda by the military against young people. There are layers of challenges overlapping over one another that the youth faces.

Security Challenges

The junta in Myanmar has committed mass killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, and sexual violence, described as crimes against humanity by Human Rights Watch (2023). Nearly 2 million people were displaced by May 2023, with the military burning 60,000 homes and targeting slums suspected of sheltering pro-democracy protesters (UNHCR; ASEAN Youth Forum). Myanmar is a surveillance state, with laws allowing warrantless arrests and home searches, discriminatory inspections based on appearance, and arrests for anti-coup social media posts (Heinrich Böll Stiftung). Civilians known as 'Dalans' report political activities to the military, while disguised soldiers monitor streets and Huawei-produced facial recognition systems have been installed (Amnesty International; "Myanmar: Facial Recognition System").

The military has further frozen the bank accounts of anti-coup activists, and has cut off cash flow. Internet and electricity are limited, with power cuts after 5 p.m., disrupting communication, education, and business.

Socio-economic Breakdown

The Covid-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup in Myanmar have plunged millions into poverty, shrinking the middle class by 50% (UNDP). Widespread insecurity, conflict, and economic instability have worsened the crisis. The World Bank reported an 18% contraction in Myanmar's economy in 2021, leading to severe job losses, hunger, and poverty (Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs). Sanctions on oil and gas production and the exit of Western energy firms further darken the economic outlook.

Public services, including education and healthcare, are barely functional, and inflation has worsened poverty. Military actions, like burning 60,000 houses and targeting slums, have led to land grabs and forced migration (ASEAN Youth Forum).

The pandemic caused a decline in business investment and the closure of many enterprises. After a projected 18% GDP drop in 2021, the World Bank estimated a modest 1% recovery by September 2022, though 1 million jobs were lost, and many faced reduced earnings (World Bank).

Impact on Education

Myanmar's education system was already struggling before the coup. In 2019, only 31.6% of people aged 15-24 attended school, with dropout rates spiking after age 14, primarily due to economic hardship and lack of interest (Inter-censal Survey Union Report). Post-coup, political instability and inflation have worsened access to education, while the military's ban on international curricula and standardized tests has further limited opportunities (ASEAN Youth Forum).

Though the military claims to offer free education, corruption, inflation, and unsafe conditions prevent many from attending junta-run schools ("I Can't Afford It: Poverty"). The closure of military-run schools and the inaccessibility of free education have pushed students to seek opportunities abroad, though few can afford it (ASEAN Youth Forum).

The resignation of 300,000 educators as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement has further disrupted the system. The military's reversion to a nationalistic curriculum neglects cultural diversity (ASEAN Youth Forum). The UN reports that 1,400 children have been arbitrarily detained, with 7.8 million out of school and 260 schools attacked since the coup (ASEAN Youth Forum).

Impact on Employment

Myanmar's employment sector is primarily agriculture-based, with about 50% of the labor force engaged in farming (Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs). However, the coup and subsequent crises have disrupted labor markets across various industries, including NGOs and INGOs that have gradually withdrawn from Myanmar since 2021.

Surveys during the Spring Revolution revealed that nearly half of respondents (48%) were jobless during the early stages of the movement, with 11% still unemployed a year later (Ministry of Women, Youth, and Children Affairs Myanmar, 2022). Many young people did not complete their education or take graduation exams, leaving them unqualified for jobs that require higher education (ASEAN Youth Forum).

This situation has forced many into precarious, low-wage jobs, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. Although some seek employment abroad, applying for work visas is prohibitively expensive, and the lack of proper documentation adds further barriers. Thailand, a common destination for migrant workers, has restricted work visas for Myanmar citizens due to the large influx of refugees. Those who manage to work abroad often earn insufficient wages to support their families back home.

Inflation, rising internet and electricity costs, and company closures have further contributed to poverty and unemployment, leaving Myanmar's population in a dire socio-economic state (Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs).

Healthcare in Myanmar: An Analysis

Although the country's population has doubled in recent years, its healthcare infrastructure is still underdeveloped compared to international standards. Due to a shortage of qualified employees, public and private hospitals are drastically understaffed, and quality infrastructural facilities and equipment are absent.

After February 2021, the Tatmadaw took control of the country through a coup d'état which worsened the situation—the military waged war against anyone who spoke out against them. The Civil Disobedience Movement was primarily led by civil servants, most of whom were healthcare workers specifically targeted by the military. Under international human rights law, every state is supposed to protect its healthcare workers and ensure access to quality healthcare even during war.

However, due to the coup in Myanmar, hospitals have been raided and shot at by the military and healthcare workers have been attacked and beaten almost constantly. A total of 415 attacks have been documented only on healthcare workers in the past three years after the military took power. The reports about the violence the people, and especially healthcare workers are facing in the country are to a large extent related to warranted and unwarranted arrests and detention and the filings and procedures of the same are not followed properly. Furthermore, the interactions between the people and the Tatmadaw are not covered by the media nor on other social media platforms, mostly at the request of the arrested persons' family members as doing so will complicate their release procedures.

Reports of beating up and shooting of various healthcare workers, while they provide aid to injured protesters, have become everyday news for the people of Myanmar. Even during the pandemic, these workers were arrested while they were treating the patients inside clinics, most of whom died from COVID-19 inside the jail.

In the crossfires, healthcare facilities and infrastructure have also been attacked, raided, destroyed or occupied. The military occupies hospitals and other facilities right before big protests and arrests healthcare workers, forcing injured protesters to seek help elsewhere. Additionally, ambulances that should be used for carrying severely injured protesters are used by the military hindering civilians' access to medical assistance and healthcare services on time without any fear.

Empowering Her: Changing the Narrative

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a deeply entrenched issue in Myanmar, fueled by political instability and longstanding patriarchal practices. Since the military coup in 2021, there has been a marked increase in both overt and covert forms of oppression against women. GBV encompasses a range of abuses, including physical and sexual violence, trafficking, and other human rights violations. The presence of colonial-era laws, such as the “darkness law,” grants the military broad authority to arrest and detain individuals deemed suspicious after sunset, creating an atmosphere of fear and enabling unchecked military power.

One of the most harrowing instances of GBV in Myanmar occurred during the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in 2017. Military operations in Rakhine State resulted in widespread atrocities against Rohingya women, including gang rapes and murders by military personnel. This brutal campaign of violence forced over 500,000 Rohingya to flee to neighbouring countries such as Bangladesh, India, and China, highlighting the dire humanitarian crisis resulting from the military's actions.

Despite the pervasive violence and discrimination they face, women in Myanmar have emerged as a formidable force in the resistance against the military junta. Representing over 50% of frontline protesters, women have taken the lead in organising and participating in pro-democracy rallies across the country. Their courageous defiance is particularly significant in a society where gender roles are traditionally restrictive. However, their activism has not gone unpunished. Women of all ages, including as young as seven, have been subjected to arrest and abuse by military officials, showcasing the regime's brutal crackdown on dissent.

The resilience and determination of Myanmar's women have been evident throughout this tumultuous period. Women leaders and activists have broken down societal norms and stereotypes, demonstrating that they can not only envision but actively fight for a better future. Their efforts are vital to the ongoing struggle for democracy and gender equality in the country.

Since the 2011 democratic elections, which had opened doors to new opportunities for women regarding their rights and gender equality, the 2021 coup d'état has rolled back significant progress, pushing women back into traditional roles. Nevertheless, their resolve to reclaim their rights and contribute to societal change has transformed the narrative surrounding women's roles in Myanmar. The innovative forms of protest adopted by women, such as hanging sarongs and undergarments outside their homes to deter military forces, leverage cultural beliefs that equate such actions with loss of masculinity for men. They also bang pots and pans at night as a means of warding off perceived threats and sending a clear message to the military that they are not welcome. Unfortunately, these practices have since been criminalised, further illustrating the lengths to which the junta will go to suppress dissent.

International attention and support for women in Myanmar have grown, with various NGOs and governments condemning the actions of the Tatmadaw. There is an increasing recognition of the need to empower victims of GBV, a crucial step in addressing the crimes committed by the military. However, the oppressive actions of the Tatmadaw present significant challenges to these efforts. Despite the obstacles, the strength, resilience, and stubbornness displayed by women throughout Myanmar demonstrate their unwavering commitment to achieving a more democratic and inclusive society. Their activism not only fights against gender-based violence but also champions broader human rights, ensuring that the struggle for equality and justice continues in Myanmar.

Recommendations

Taking into consideration all the limitations on rescuing Myanmar from the crisis, here are a few policy recommendations:

1. **Establishment of Support Agencies in Neighboring Countries:** Neighboring countries, with the support of the international community, should establish cross-border support agencies to provide material assistance to civil society organizations (CSOs) in Myanmar. These agencies would circumvent financial restrictions by providing aid in kind, ensuring CSOs can continue their vital operations despite frozen accounts.
2. **International Funding for Refugee Accommodation:** The international community should mobilize resources to support neighboring countries in hosting Myanmar refugees. This can include financial incentives and logistical support to help these countries accommodate displaced populations and maintain human rights standards in refugee camps.
3. **Scholarships for Myanmar Students:** Expand international scholarship programs for Myanmar students to pursue higher education abroad (ASEAN Youth Primer). These scholarships should prioritize marginalized groups, providing opportunities for youth whose education has been disrupted by the coup and ongoing instability.
4. **Support to Resistance Groups:** Provide non-lethal support to resistance groups, ensuring compliance with international humanitarian law. This may include communication devices, medical supplies, and other non-military resources to enhance their ability to resist the junta while safeguarding civilians.
5. **Alternative Education Channels:** Explore and implement alternative methods of delivering education, low-tech education systems that do not rely heavily on electricity or internet access.
6. **Surveillance Monitoring and Military Financing:** International organizations, including human rights monitoring bodies (ASEAN Youth Primer), should intensify efforts to track the financing channels and sources of funds supporting the junta's surveillance apparatus. Collaborative efforts between governments and civil society can help expose and disrupt these funding networks.

7. Global Advocacy and Recognition of Myanmar's Exile Government: International platforms such as the United Nations, and other diplomatic forums should increase the visibility of Myanmar's government-in-exile. Regular opportunities should be provided for the exile government to present their case, raising global awareness and fostering international solidarity.

8. INGO Support for Agriculturalists: International NGOs should collaborate with local agriculturalists in rural Myanmar, purchasing their produce at fair prices, creating agriculture based employment. This would strengthen rural livelihoods and reduce dependence on military-controlled markets.

9. Livelihood Training for School Dropouts: Implement vocational and livelihood training programs targeting youth who have dropped out of school. These programs should be geared toward equipping them with practical skills in areas like agriculture, small-scale manufacturing, and IT, allowing them to build sustainable livelihoods.

10. Alternative Communication Channels: Develop alternative methods of communication that bypass junta surveillance. Devices that are low in electricity consumption and difficult to monitor could be distributed discreetly to activists, ensuring secure communication within resistance networks.

11. Global Focus on Myanmar's Crisis: To draw greater international attention to Myanmar, advocacy campaigns should focus on integrating Myanmar's plight into global discourses. International media, think tanks, and diplomatic circles should be engaged to prevent Myanmar from being overshadowed by other conflicts such as Russia-Ukraine(ASEAN Youth Primer).

12. Strengthen Legal Protection: Enforce and enact gender-sensitive laws like the Prevention and Protection of Violence Against Women (PoVAW) Bill to tackle the GBV incidents faced by the women of Myanmar. The police force should also be trained in gender-sensitivity to handle them properly and empathetically.

13. Establish Support Services for Survivors: Establish several shelters for women and healthcare workers who have been subject to military brutality, especially in conflict-affected areas. Facilities like physical safe houses, legal aid and helplines should be made available 24/7. Provide proper mental and reproductive health support and trauma-informed healthcare services to help the victims in a better way.

14. **Humanitarian Protection for Healthcare Workers:** Strengthen international monitoring to document and report violence against healthcare workers. Ensure that the perpetrators are held accountable. Train healthcare personnel to follow protocols and report any wrongdoings or assaults by Tatmadaw.

15. **Empowerment and capacity building:** Support women's economic empowerment and education through vocational training, financial aid, and leadership programs. Empower healthcare workers by providing them with professional development opportunities and protection resources.

16. **International Advocacy:** Increase international pressure on the Myanmar government and the Tatmadaw to stop inflicting violence on women and healthcare workers by increasing diplomatic and economic pressures. Partner with global forums like WHO and other global initiatives to advocate for the protection of healthcare workers, especially in conflict-stricken areas.

17. **Improve Data Collection:** Implement systematic data collection regarding the violence inflicted on women and healthcare workers in the country. Using this data and research, develop evidence-based policies to address GBV and workplace violence in healthcare settings.

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