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CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN MYANMAR

Leverage and Solidarity after the 1 February Coup

Shona Loong

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FOREWORD

The economic, political, strategic and cultural dynamism in Southeast Asia has gained added relevance in recent years with the spectacular rise of giant economies in East and South Asia. This has drawn greater attention to the region and to the enhanced role it now plays in international relations and global economics.

The sustained effort made by Southeast Asian nations since 1967 towards a peaceful and gradual integration of their economies has had indubitable success, and perhaps as a consequence of this, most of these countries are undergoing deep political and social changes domestically and are constructing innovative solutions to meet new international challenges. Big Power tensions continue to be played out in the neighbourhood despite the tradition of neutrality exercised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

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THE EDITORS

Centre-Periphery Relations in Myanmar: Leverage and Solidarity after the 1 February Coup

By Shona Loong

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Building interethnic solidarity is crucial for the movement opposing the regime that took power in Myanmar's 1 February 2021 coup.
- Analysing the coup as primarily a crisis of democracy underestimates the centrality of ethnic conflict to the Tatmadaw's role in Myanmar's national politics.
- In the context of Myanmar's ethnic diversity, ethnic armed organizations may play a key role in harmonizing responses to the coup. Successive Myanmar governments have failed to meaningfully address ethnic conflict, thereby entrenching the Tatmadaw's dominance.
- Redressing the grievances of non-Bamar groups is crucial to ensuring national and regional stability. Conversely, strategies that mistakenly assume national unity will lead to short-term solutions may cycle back into violence and conflict.
- There is little evidence that the Tatmadaw is willing to negotiate with ethnic armed organizations or the National Unity Government. These organizations require support in coordinating anti-coup efforts and material resources to enhance their leverage against the post-coup regime.
- The anti-coup movement's relationship with Myanmar's ethnic groups has moved through three broad phases: (1) diversity without coordinated demands; (2) visions of a federal future; and (3) agitating for change.
- The movement is at a critical juncture. Its success depends on its ability to transform existing centre-periphery relations. The role of

ethnic armed organizations and civil society organizations needs to be recognized rather than sidelined in favour of the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw or the National Unity Government.

- Previous missed opportunities for transforming centre-periphery relations are instructive for actors seeking to support the anti-coup movement. Three aspects of the anti-coup movement have historical precedents in Karen State: (1) refuge; (2) non-state social services; and (3) shared experiences of violence. In previous iterations of each, a failure in relational thinking has entrenched the centralization of power in Myanmar.

Centre-Periphery Relations in Myanmar: Leverage and Solidarity after the 1 February Coup

By Shona Loong[1]

INTRODUCTION

The 1 February 2021 coup in Myanmar has forced a reckoning over how to build solidarity across difference, including across ethnic divides. Days after the coup, protesters thronged the streets of major cities. Although they were united by a desire to fell the State Administration Council (SAC) junta, their demands diverged in other respects. In predominantly Bamar areas such as Yangon and Mandalay, protesters wore red, symbolizing the ousted National League for Democracy (NLD). By contrast, many protesters in the ethnic states wore black, seeking to denounce the Tatmadaw without aligning themselves with the NLD.[2] More than 750 protesters have since died at the hands of the military regime.[3] Moreover, at the end of March, the Tatmadaw launched airstrikes in Karen State, on the Myanmar-Thailand border, displacing

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[1] Shona Loong recently received her DPhil in geography from the University of Oxford, where she conducted research on civil society and post-conflict development in Karen State, Myanmar.

[2] Kyaw Hsan Hlaing and Emily Fishbein, "In Myanmar's Protests, Diverse Ethnic People Stand United Against a Military Coup, but Some Are Pushing for Bigger Change", *Globe and Mail*, 12 February 2021, https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-in-myanmars-protests-ethnic-majorities-and-minorities-stand-united (accessed 28 April 2021).

[3] Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), "Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup", AAPP, 11 May 2021, https://aappb.org/?p=14994 (accessed 12 May 2021).

30,000 civilians over two weeks.[4] These strikes marked a new phase in the seven-decade-long conflict between the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Tatmadaw.

The coup regime is escalating armed violence on two fronts: against urban protesters and against ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) operating in Myanmar's contested borderlands. As a result, questions about how to build interethnic solidarity among a diverse set of anti-coup actors, including protesters, ousted NLD leaders, and EAOs are becoming increasingly pertinent. However, many international actors prefer to denounce the junta rather than recognize the existence of armed groups and ethnic diversity within the country. In other words, international actors tend to retain a focus on the central state, overlooking the violence suffered by people on the country's periphery. They thus also overlook significant opportunities for leverage against the coup regime. Chances of overthrowing that regime and securing a new, peaceful future for Myanmar are best improved through the forging of solidarity across entrenched differences.

A failure to see Myanmar's centre and periphery as relationally constituted has already had great costs. A decade of donor support for central government reforms has failed to resolve the grievances of the country's conflict-affected populations.[5] To the contrary, the failure of the donor-funded peace process to reach a meaningful resolution has accentuated borderland populations' mistrust of the Union government.[6] The coup now presents an opportunity to stem these cycles of conflict. To

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[4] Tommy Walker, "'No Ceasefire' In Myanmar's Ethnic Minority States, According to Humanitarian Group", *Voice of America*, 9 April 2021, https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/no-cease-fire-myanmars-ethnic-minority-states-according-humanitarian-group (accessed 28 April 2021).

[5] Anne Décobert, "'The Struggle Isn't Over': Shifting Aid Paradigms and Redefining 'Development' in Eastern Myanmar", *World Development* 127 (2020): 1047–68.

[6] Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), "Burma's Dead-End Peace Negotiation Process: A Case Study of the Land Sector", *Progressive Voice*, July 2018, https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Eng-Burmas-Dead-End-Peace-Negotiation-Process-KPSN-report-web.pdf (accessed 11 May 2021).

achieve this end, international actors will need to see Myanmar's centre and periphery as dynamically related. Fears that Myanmar is becoming a "failed state" are also misleading:[7] Myanmar is not stumbling passively into state failure but is experiencing the cost of errors accumulated over decades.

This paper offers a relational analysis of Myanmar's anti-coup movement. It also addresses the costs of failing to situate the movement in centre-periphery relations by showing that borderland dynamics are not marginal to the anti-coup movement; in fact, they are central to its success. Actors that misunderstand Myanmar's borderlands—and correspondingly, the role of EAOs and non-Bamar groups in the anti-coup movement—will overlook opportunities for leverage and solidarity. The next section explains how the history of Myanmar's borderlands shapes possibilities and challenges to inter-ethnic solidarity in the wake of the 1 February coup. The third section of the paper examines the demands articulated by EAOs and civil society groups to explain that the anti-coup movement has evolved in three broad phases beyond merely denouncing the coup regime.

The paper's fourth section examines three emergent phenomena in post-coup Myanmar which directly implicate its borderland populations, and that will have significant effects on the anti-coup movement: (1) refuge; (2) non-state social services; and (3) shared experiences of violence. It examines these phenomena from the vantage point of Karen State. This examination demonstrates that there have been precedents for each of the three phenomena. Because of a failure of relational thinking, each of these precedents has re-entrenched cycles of ethnic conflict. This paper concludes by spelling out the implications of its argument for leverage and solidarity in the anti-coup movement: International actors must acknowledge Myanmar's postcolonial history, the country's ethnic diversity, and the existence of EAOs in Myanmar, while pressuring the

[7] Joshua Kurlantzick, "Post-coup Myanmar Could Become a Failed State", *World Politics Review*, 12 April 2021, https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29563/in-myanmar-civil-war-looms-as-violence-escalates-post-coup (accessed 11 May 2021).

latter to remain accountable to the people and to the groups whom they claim to represent.

As much as possible, this paper draws on "insider" analyses by Burmese organizations and individuals who are watching events in Myanmar unfold first-hand. It is also informed by interviews with KNU, donor, and civil society representatives undertaken between 2018 and 2019 in Karen State and several Thai border towns, conducted as part of the author's doctoral research on civil society in ceasefire areas.[8]

CONCEPTUALIZING CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN MYANMAR

Scholars across the social sciences concur on the need to understand state-building from the perspective of peripheral areas—from, that is, a country's frontiers, margins and borderlands.[9] Furthermore, scholars see peripheries not as zones exempt from the reach of state power but rather as areas where attempts at state-building intersect with other processes, such as militarization, racialization, and primitive accumulation, along with the violence and dispossession that these processes produce.[10]

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[8] Shona Loong, "At the Margins of a 'Development Darling': Civil Society, Territory, and Development in Karen State, Myanmar", Doctoral dissertation, University of Oxford, 2021.

[9] See, for instance, Anna Tsing, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen: Marginality in an Out-of-the-Way Place* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Benedikt Korf and Timothy Raeymaekers, eds., *Violence on the Margins: States, Conflict, and Borderlands* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Jason Cons, *Sensitive Space: Fragmented Territory at the India-Bangladesh Border* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016); Michael Eilenberg, *At the Edges of States: Dynamics of State Formation in the Indonesian Borderlands* (Leiden: KITLV Press, 2012); and Jelle J.P. Wouters, *In the Shadows of Naga Insurgency: Tribes, State, and Violence in Northeast India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[10] Mattias Borg Rasmussen and Christian Lund, "Reconfiguring Frontier Spaces: The Territorialization of Resource Control", *World Development* 101 (2018): 388–99, and Tania Li, "Relational Histories and the Production of Difference on Sulawesi's Upland Frontier", *Journal of Asian Studies* 60, no. 1 (2001): 41–66.

At the same time, a state's peripheries can offer some reprieve from state coercion, allowing movements, transnational networks and illicit economies to flourish.[11]

The geographer Gillian Hart proposes a relational approach to space, which views places as "formed through relations with wider arenas and other places", and boundaries as "socially constructed and constituted".[12] This approach situates the violence and opportunities produced in borderlands in relations between the state's centre and its peripheries. On the one hand, militarization in borderlands increases a state's ability to consolidate its power at the centre, by subjugating populations considered a threat to the national community. On the other, cross-border networks can pose a significant challenge to state power, even in contexts where state power appears unassailable. A relational approach brings both these dimensions of centre-periphery relations into full view. It also insists that centres and peripheries cannot exist in isolation but are, rather, evolving in dynamic relation to each other.

Centre-periphery relations are key to understanding state power in Southeast Asia in general,[13] and in Myanmar in particular. Lee Jones writes that "the most critical axis of socio-political conflict since

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[11] Chiara Brambilla and Reece Jones, "Rethinking Borders, Violence, and Conflict: From Sovereign Power to Borderscapes as Sites of Struggles", *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 38, no. 2 (2020): 287–305; Prem Kumar Rajaram and Carl Grundy-Warr, eds., *Borderscapes: Hidden Geographies and Politics at Territory's Edge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007); and Shona Loong, "The Neoliberal Borderscape: Neoliberalism's Effects on the Social Worlds of Migrants Along the Thai-Myanmar Border", *Political Geography* 74 (2019): 102–35.

[12] Gillian Hart, "Denaturalizing Dispossession: Critical Ethnography in the Age of Resurgent Imperialism", *Antipode* 38, no. 5 (2006): 977–1004, p. 995.

[13] For examples of a relational approach to state power in Southeast Asia, see Keith Barney, "Laos and the Making of a 'Relational' Resource Frontier", *Geographical Journal* 175, no. 2 (2009): 146–59; and Miles Kenney-Lazar, "Relations of Sovereignty: The Uneven Production of Transnational Plantation Territories in Laos", *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 45, no. 2 (2020): 331–44.

Burma's independence has been centre-periphery struggles between the central government … and ethnic-minority and communist insurgencies located in Burma's borderlands." He argues that the persistence of this conflict has allowed the Tatmadaw to legitimize its interventions in national politics, by positioning itself as a protector of the Union amid a proliferation of existential threats.[14] The recent coup has renewed speculation about the Tatmadaw's motives. Numerous commentaries show that its grandiose self-perception is likely to have led to the coup and subsequent crackdowns. These commentaries draw on first-hand accounts of how the Tatmadaw instils soldiers with the belief that they are the sole guardians of the country, such that many soldiers see the NLD as traitors and protesters as criminals.[15] However, there has been less post-coup reflection about how the Tatmadaw sustains this self-perception through prolonged counterinsurgency campaigns against EAOs, or about how borderland populations suffer violence as a result.

Colonialism markedly accentuated inter-group tensions in Myanmar. British colonial officers seeking to enumerate their subjects helped form and harden ethnic categories.[16] Today, these categories are foundational to Myanmar's nation-building project: citizenship is allocated on the basis of one's belonging to one of 135 "national races" (*taingyintha*)—a category derived in part from colonial censuses.[17] However, not all

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[14] Lee Jones, "Explaining Myanmar's Regime Transition: The Periphery Is Central", *Democratization*, 21, no. 5 (2014): 780–802, p. 785.

[15] Hannah Beech, "Inside Myanmar's Army: 'They See Protesters as Criminals'", *New York Times*, 4 April 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/28/world/asia/myanmar-army-protests.html/ (accessed 28 April 2021); and Rio (pseud.), "Critical Juncture: Being a Soldier's Son in Burma's Ongoing Crisis", *Tea Circle*, 12 April 2021, https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/04/12/critical-juncture-being-a-soldiers-son-in-burmas-ongoing-crisis/ (accessed 28 April 2021).

[16] Jane M. Ferguson, "Who's Counting? Ethnicity, Belonging, and the National Census in Burma/Myanmar", *Bijdragen tot de taal-, land-en volkenkunde/ Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences of Southeast Asia* 171, no. 1 (2015): 1–28.

[17] Myanmar's 1982 Citizenship Law defines *taingyintha* as people living in what is now Myanmar territory prior to the first Anglo-Burmese War (1824–26). In 1990, the junta drew up a list of the 135 *taingyintha*. According to Nick Cheesman,

taingyintha are equal in the eyes of the state. The contemporary marginalization of non-Bamar populations also has its roots in colonial times, during which colonial officers preferentially incorporated certain ethnic groups into the governing apparatus. For example, the British recruited people classified as Karen, Chin and Kachin into their armed forces, in preference to people classified as Bamar.[18]

Moreover, the British classified the territory they administered into Ministerial Burma and the Frontier Areas. In Ministerial Burma, the British dismantled the monarchic system and instituted direct rule, to the chagrin of the Bamar-majority population. There, in response to recurrent anti-colonial rebellions, colonial authorities framed the population as "enemies to be pacified rather than subjects to be incorporated", inciting further resentment towards those authorities.[19] In contrast, the British retained indigenous chiefs in the Frontier Areas, which corresponded to borderland areas populated by non-Bamar groups.[20] Hence, the colonial period sowed the seeds for antagonistic relationships between Burma's ethnic groups.[21] Interethnic tensions came to a head during the Second

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the origins of the number 135 were never formally explained, although it could have been based on a list of ethnic groups included in the 1931 colonial census. Rohingya are not considered *taingyintha*, and are thus entirely excluded from the nation-building project. See Nick Cheesman, "How in Myanmar 'National Races' Came to Surpass Citizenship and Exclude Rohingya", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, no. 3 (2017): 461–83.

[18] Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 44.

[19] Mary Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 16.

[20] Mikael Gravers, "Disorder as Order: The Ethno-Nationalist Struggle of the Karen in Burma/Myanmar—A Discussion of the Dynamics of an Ethnicized Civil War and Its Historical Roots", *Journal of Burma Studies* 19, no. 1 (2015): 27–78.

[21] As a result, the colonized themselves began to organize along ethnic lines. For instance, see Hitomi Fujimura, "Disentangling the Colonial Narrative of the Karen National Association of 1881: The Motive Behind Karen Baptist Intellectuals' Claim for a Nation", *Journal of Burma Studies* 24, no. 2 (2020): 275–314.

World War, when the British Burma Army, dominated by non-Bamar groups, fought against the Japanese-allied Burma Independence Army (BIA). The BIA is a precursor to the modern-day Tatmadaw, formed to agitate for Burmese independence. Both its leadership and rank-and-file were overwhelmingly Bamar.

In March 1945, the BIA, newly renamed the Burma National Army, switched allegiances, and worked to drive the Japanese out of Burma.[22] Subsequent negotiations on independence occurred primarily between the British and Bamar anticolonial nationalists, although the Bamar comprised only 50–65 per cent of Burma's population.[23] Meanwhile, many members of non-Bamar groups believed that, despite their exclusion from independence negotiations, they still possessed the right to self-determination. The confused place of non-Bamar groups in the incipient nation-state was especially stark at the 1947 Panglong Conference. The conference granted the right of secession to Shan and Kachin representatives. However, the Karen were present only as observers, while the Mon, Wa and Naga were absent.[24] In 1948, "just as [the Burmese state] became independent from colonial rule, it utterly collapsed."[25] Months after independence, the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which had participated in independence negotiations, launched an armed rebellion amid increasing tensions with the incumbent government. In 1949, the Karen National Union (KNU) commenced its armed struggle—the first in a series of the ethno-nationalist rebellions in Burma and then Myanmar that have not ended. The KNU's rebellion was borne out of its frustrations with the Rangoon government, which did not heed its pleas for autonomy and power-sharing.[26]

General Ne Win became the commander of the Tatmadaw in 1949. Ne Win was twice at the helm of junta rule. Between 1958 and 1960, Ne Win took power through a "caretaker government". The civilian

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[22] Smith, *Burma*, pp. 60–68.

[23] Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 16.

[24] Matthew J. Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong", *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (2008): 889–910.

[25] Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 114.

[26] Smith, *Burma*, pp. 64, 114.

government returned to power briefly after general elections, until Ne Win seized power by force in 1962, citing fears of secession by ethno-nationalist groups.[27] Thereafter, the Tatmadaw escalated its counterinsurgency campaigns against the KNU, the CPB, and other rebel groups,[28] forcing villagers in borderland areas to relocate or treating them as insurgents whom its soldiers could shoot on sight.[29] This infamous Four Cuts approach—so named because it severed ties between rebels and their sources of food, funds, intelligence and recruits—underlined borderland populations' violent exclusion from the Burmese nation-state. At the same time, the tenacity of rebel groups reinforced the Tatmadaw's perception of itself as warding off the disintegration of the Union, and the sense that Bamar identity was under threat.[30] Ne Win also reordered the country's economy, nationalizing key industries and instituting the Tatmadaw's fiscal autonomy.[31]

Ne Win is considered the architect of the Tatmadaw[32]—an organization whose centrality to national politics hinges on the wars it has waged in

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[27] Matthew J. Walton, "The Disciplining Discourse of Unity in Burmese Politics", *Journal of Burma Studies* 19, no. 1 (2015): 1–26.

[28] A full history of each of these EAOs is outside the scope of this paper. However, see Adam Burke, Nicola Williams, Patrick Barron, Kim Jolliffe, and Thomas Carr, "The Contested Areas of Myanmar: Subnational Conflict, Aid, and Development", The Asia Foundation, 2017, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/ContestedAreasMyanmarReport.pdf (accessed 28 April 2021).

[29] Smith, *Burma*, pp. 259–60.

[30] According to Mary Callahan, an official history published in 1991 stated that 75 per cent of Myanmar's towns had fallen to insurgent groups at some point. See Callahan, *Making Enemies*, p. 114; for more on the Tatmadaw's paranoia, see Andrew Selth, "Even Paranoids Have Enemies: Cyclone Nargis and Myanmar's Fears of Invasion", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 30, no. 3 (2008): 379–402.

[31] Bertil Lintner, "Why the Tatmadaw Won't Crack in Myanmar", *Asia Times*, 20 April 2021, https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/why-the-tatmadaw-wont-crack-in-myanmar/ (accessed 28 April 2021).

[32] Carlos Sardiña Galache, "The All-Out War of the Burmese Military against Its Own People", *positions politics*, 30 March 2021. https://positionspolitics.org/carlos-sardina-galache-the-all-out-war-of-the-burmese-military-against-its-own-people/ (accessed 10 May 2021).

Burma's peripheries. But the general himself ceded power in 1988, in the wake of widespread protests. The Tatmadaw immediately seized direct power again, and subsequent leaders of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (1988–97) and State Peace and Development Council (1997–2011) opened Myanmar up to foreign trade and investment. The 1988–2011 period ushered in three shifts in centre-periphery relations. First, in 1989, the once-formidable CPB fragmented into four EAOs.[33] With the collapse of the ideologically driven CPB, the Tatmadaw's multifront borderland war became drawn almost exclusively along ethnic lines. Second, the Tatmadaw initiated ceasefires with a number of EAOs. Forty armed organizations signed ceasefires with the Tatmadaw between 1989 and 2009, including the powerful Kachin Independence Organization (KIO). However, the ceasefires "suspended open hostilities but offered little in the way of lasting political solutions".[34] Third, offers of lucrative resource concessions, which some ethnic elites accepted, often accompanied these ceasefires.[35] The 1994 KIO ceasefire resulted in the exploitation of natural resources on an unprecedented scale, causing the KIO to lose legitimacy among local inhabitants who experienced widespread dispossession as a result of these business deals. The KIO ceasefire collapsed in 2011,[36] leading one prominent scholar to conclude

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[33] These are the Burma National United Party (later the United Wa State Army), the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, the National Democratic Alliance Army, and the New Democratic Army; see Bertil Lintner, "The United Wa State Army and Burma's Peace Process", *Peaceworks* no. 147 (Washington: United States Institute of Peace, 2019), https://www.usip.org/publications/2019/04/united-wa-state-army-and-burmas-peace-process (accessed 11 May 2021).

[34] John Buchanan, "Militias in Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, 2016, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Militias-in-Myanmar.pdf (accessed 28 April 2021).

[35] Kevin Woods, "Ceasefire Capitalism: Military-Private Partnerships, Resource Concessions, and Military-State Building in the Burma-China Borderlands", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 38, no. 4 (2011): 747–70.

[36] David Brenner, *Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar's Borderlands* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019).

that, in Myanmar, peace deals that operate through elite co-optation often drive further violence.[37]

Many observers regard 2011–21 as Myanmar's democratization period, characterized by loosened restrictions on foreign investment, increased freedom of association and expression, and multiparty elections. In 2011, the military-backed Union State and Development Party (USDP) took power after the first such elections, boycotted by the NLD.[38] The NLD won the 2015 polls by a landslide, and came to power the following year. The USDP government's attempts to broker peace with the country's EAOs met with international acclaim. The KNU, at war with the Tatmadaw since 1949, signed a bilateral ceasefire in 2012.[39] Soon after, the United States announced that it would reward "action with action" by easing sanctions.[40] In 2015, the USDP government signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) with eight EAOs, including the KNU. The United States lifted all sanctions on Myanmar the following year, in response to "Burma's tremendous progress toward democratic consolidation", while the European Union decided not to call attention to Myanmar's human rights shortcomings at the UN for the first time in twenty-five years.[41] Such international acclaim translated into material support for the USDP-led peace process, which the NLD government duly inherited. The most prominent international initiative was the Joint Peace Fund (JPF), through which ten donors pooled funding primarily to support negotiations and peacebuilding initiatives following from the NCA. The JPF's budget was approximately US$100 million

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[37] Ibid., p. 111.

[38] The junta held elections in 1990, Myanmar's first polls in thirty years. The NLD won these elections by a landslide, but the junta refused to recognize this result.

[39] Previous ceasefire negotiations, such as those held in 1994, 1997, and 2005, were aborted.

[40] *Al Jazeera*, "US green light for Myanmar aid work", 18 April 2012.

[41] Office of the Spokesperson, "U.S.-Burma Relations", U.S. Embassy in Burma, 15 September 2016, https://mm.usembassy.gov/u-s-burma-relations/ (accessed 11 May 2021).

between 2016 and 2021.[42] More broadly, between 2010 and 2015, a tenfold increase in development aid for Myanmar signalled donors' support for the USDP's peace deals.[43] ASEAN countries remained more reticent about the peace process, likely due to the bloc's adherence to non-interference. Nevertheless, they unanimously agreed that Myanmar would take its turn chairing the association in 2014.[44]

Sanguine international responses to Myanmar's "democratic transition" misread centre-periphery relations in Myanmar on three counts. First, they overstated EAOs' acquiescence to the peace process. In 2018, two more EAOs acceded to the NCA, bringing the total number of signatories up to ten. Yet a significant number of EAOs continued to be in active conflict with the Union government. One 2018 estimate showed that only 25 per cent of the country's non-state armed fighters were part of NCA signatory organizations.[45]

Second, the peace process achieved few long-term political objectives, and may have exacerbated tensions between borderland populations and the Union government. In southeast Myanmar, by 2019 only 13 per cent of individuals surveyed were "confident" or "very confident" that the peace process would lead to sustainable peace.[46] As the KIO ceasefire

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[42] Thomas Carr, "Supporting the Transition: Understanding Aid to Myanmar since 2011", The Asia Foundation, February 2018, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Supporting-the-Transition-Understanding-Aid-to-Myanmar-since-2011_ENG.pdf (accessed 28 April 2021).

[43] Between 2011 and 2015, aid commitments totalled US$13.7 billion, while foreign direct investment amounted to US$27.6 billion. See Burke et al., "The Contested Areas of Myanmar", p. 45.

[44] BBC News, "ASEAN Leaders Approve Burma Chairmanship Bid", *BBC*, 17 November 2011, https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-15781595 (accessed 11 May 2021).

[45] Bobby Anderson, "Stalemate and Suspicion: An Appraisal of the Myanmar Peace Process", *Tea Circle*, 6 June 2018, https://teacircleoxford.com/2018/06/06/stalemate-and-suspicion-an-appraisal-of-the-myanmar-peace-process (accessed 11 May 2021).

[46] The study defines "southeast Myanmar" as the area most affected by conflict between the KNU and the Tatmadaw since the 1970s. That area encompasses

suggested, business deals between the Tatmadaw and ethnic elites often accompanied ceasefires in Myanmar. These deals dispossessed local people and eroded their trust in the Union government, and in local elites. Many inhabitants of KNU areas were sceptical of the peace process for the same reasons.[47] Moreover, recurrent Tatmadaw incursions in Karen State in 2016, 2018, and 2020–21, in violation of the NCA, continued to diminish the credibility of the peace process to borderland populations.[48]

Third, and finally, international support for the peace process failed to take into account the fact that a "neither war nor peace" situation entrenched the Tatmadaw's ability to operate outside of civilian oversight.[49] The country's military conglomerates, which had expanded into ceasefire areas, provided the Tatmadaw with a major source of off-budget revenue.[50] The Tatmadaw's interest in prolonging a "neither war

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all of Kayin State, and parts of Mon State, Tanintharyi Region and eastern Bago Region. Saferworld and Karen Peace Support Network, "Security, justice and governance in south east Myanmar: a knowledge, attitudes and practices survey in Karen ceasefire areas", Saferworld, January 2019, https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/publications/1194-security-justice-and-governance-in-south-east-myanmar-a-knowledge-attitudes-and-practices-survey-in-karen-ceasefire-areas (accessed 11 May 2021), p. xv.

[47] Brenner, *Rebel Politics*.

[48] Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN), "The Nightmare Returns: Karen Hopes for Peace and Stability Dashed by Burma Army's Actions", Karen Environmental and Social Action Network, 2018, https://kesan.asia/resource/the-nightmare-return-karen-hopes-for-peace-and-stability-dashed-by-burma-armys-actions/ (accessed 16 April 2021); and Salween Peace Park, "Salween Peace Park under attack: Burmese military violence undermines Indigenous Karen conservation for peace", ICCA Consortium, 2021, https://www.iccaconsortium.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/salween-peace-park-under-attack-report.pdf (accessed 16 April 2021).

[49] Tom Kramer, " 'Neither War nor Peace': Failed Ceasefires and Dispossession in Myanmar's Ethnic Borderlands", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 3 (2021): 476–96.

[50] Gerard McCarthy, *Military Capitalism in Myanmar: Examining the Origins, Continuities, and Evolution of "Khaki Capital"*, Trends in Southeast Asia, no. 6/2019 (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2019), https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/pdfs/TRS6_19.pdf (accessed 11 May 2021).

nor peace" situation was evident in its consistent attempts to spoil peace negotiations. In 2019, for instance, the Tatmadaw insisted that it would leave politics only when EAOs "no longer exist".[51] Statements like these alienated borderland populations, many of whom see EAOs as legitimate governance actors.[52]

Centre-periphery relations thus remained highly conflictual despite Myanmar's seeming progress towards democracy between 2011 and 2021. Peace negotiations did not provide a sustainable resolution to the grievances of borderland populations, which remained disenfranchised despite a reduction in open hostilities. This "neither war nor peace" situation also entrenched the Tatmadaw's perception of itself as staving off the "disintegration of the country",[53] and abetted the armed forces' fiscal autonomy. For this reason, "viewing the country's transition through the lens of democratization is not only misleading but deeply problematic".[54] Even so, international actors latched onto the seeming success of Myanmar's democratic transition, failing to account for the persistence of armed violence at the country's peripheries. They rarely considered how the Tatmadaw's borderland wars fed into its entrenchment at the centre of national politics, or how borderland dynamics could contribute to undoing the Tatmadaw's dominance.

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[51] Eleven Myanmar, "Tatmadaw Will Get Out of the Politics Only When Eternal Peace Is Achieved", *Eleven Myanmar*, 24 February 2019, https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/tatmadaw-will-get-out-of-the-politics-only-when-eternal-peace-is-achieved (accessed 11 May 2021).

[52] Brenner, *Rebel Politics*; Saferworld and Karen Peace Support Network, "Security, Justice and Governance in South East Myanmar".

[53] The words are those of the current commander-in-chief of the Tatmadaw, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, said on the third anniversary of the NCA; quoted in Chan Thar, "State Counsellor Calls for Open Minds at Peace Negotiations", *Myanmar Times,* 16 October 2018, https://www.mmtimes.com/news/state-counsellor-calls-open-minds-peace-negotiations.html (accessed 11 May 2021).

[54] David Brenner and Sarah Schulman, "Myanmar's Top-down Transition: Challenges for Civil Society", in *Accountability Amidst Fragility, Conflict, and Violence: Learning from Recent Cases*, edited by Anuradha Joshi, IDS Bulletin, 50, no. 3 (2019).

THE ANTI-COUP MOVEMENT AND MYANMAR'S ETHNIC NATIONALITIES: THREE PHASES

So far, more than 750 people have died from the Tatmadaw's crackdown on dissenters to the coup.[55] Furthermore, the Tatmadaw has intensified its attacks against EAOs that have denounced the coup regime, particularly the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) and the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), resulting in thousands being displaced.[56] The anti-coup movement has, likewise, evolved in relation to developments both in major cities and in the country's conflict-affected borderlands.

This paper uses the term "anti-coup movement" to refer to a loose collective of actors seeking to overthrow the SAC junta. These are united in denunciation of the junta, but they differ in their preferred methods, the material resources and social capital that they possess, and their visions for Myanmar's post-coup future. In its attention to centre-periphery relations, this paper maintains a focus on the ousted lawmakers organized as the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the EAOs, and the protesters. However, these categories are not monolithic; the EAOs differ in their attitudes towards the junta. Thus far, the KNU, the KIA, the New Mon State Party the Karenni National Progressive Party, and the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) have condemned the coup; other EAOs seem to be adopting a "wait and see" approach.[57] In addition, although protests are widespread in ethnic areas, non-Bamar groups' responses to the coup vary. Jangai Jap has shown that in Kachin

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[55] AAPP, "Daily Briefing in Relation to the Military Coup".

[56] *Myanmar Now*, "Myanmar Military 'Suffers Heavy Casualties' in Bid to Recapture Base from KIA", 13 April 2021, https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-military-suffers-heavy-casualties-in-bid-to-recapture-hill-base-from-kia (accessed 11 May 2021).

[57] Andrew Ong, "Myanmar's Armed Groups and the Military Coup: Involvement or Not?", *Fulcrum.sg*, 6 April 2021, https://fulcrum.sg/myanmars-armed-groups-and-the-military-coup-involvement-or-not/ (accessed 11 May 2021).

State "ordinary citizens are fighting for democracy at all costs, while members of the business-owning class and elites stand by, waiting to align themselves with an eventual victor."[58] The success of the anti-coup movement depends on the extent to which these heterogeneous actors can forge solidarity across ethnic lines and other differences, thereby transforming relations between the centre and the periphery.

Thus far, the anti-coup movement has progressed towards forging interethnic solidarity in three broad phases. Initially, the protests that arose in defiance of the 1 February coup demanded respect for the NLD's victory at the 2020 elections. Mass street protests, which spread across cities in nearly all states and regions, lacked a visible figurehead or committee for coordinating demands, although many protesters wore red in support of the NLD.[59] In this initial phase of the anti-coup movement, commentators emphasized the relative youth of protesters and their creativity.[60] Protesters also emphasized their belonging to various marginal groups, to show that Myanmar's diverse society was united in opposition to the junta.[61] Besides marching as members of various religions and sexual minorities, protesters clutched flags, held signs, and wore clothes indicating their affiliation with one ethnic group or another, including the Rohingya.

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[58] Jangai Jap, "Protesters and Bystanders: Ethnic Minorities in the Pro-Democracy Revolution", *Tea Circle*, 22 March 2021, https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/03/22/protesters-and-bystanders-ethnic-minorities-in-the-pro-democracy-revolution/ (accessed 11 May 2021).

[59] Helene Kyed, "Hopes for a New Democracy in Myanmar: Multiethnic Unity Against Military Power", *Tea Circle*, 19 March 2021, https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/03/19/hopes-for-a-new-democracy-in-myanmar-multiethnic-unity-against-military-power/ (accessed 11 May 2021).

[60] *BBC News*, "Myanmar: Mass Protests Defy Military and Gridlock Yangon", 17 February 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56094649 (accessed 11 May 2021).

[61] *The Guardian*, " 'We All Know What We Are Facing': Divided Myanmar Unites Against Coup", 10 February 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/10/we-all-know-what-were-facing-divided-myanmar-unites-against-coup (accessed 11 May 2021).

Demonstrations were broad-based from the outset. Non-Bamar people were clearly present at protests; some taking leading roles.[62] However, some ethnic people were hesitant to participate in demonstrations, having experienced marginalization and violence during the NLD's term in government. Therefore, as Khin Khin Mra explained, "many ethnic people who want to stand in solidarity with those fighting against the coup face mental barriers and a sense of dissonance in raising their voices."[63] Similarly, Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, an Arakanese writer, stated, "I want to participate wholeheartedly in these protests … [but] my ethnic nationality friends and I want more. We want to end not only military dictatorship, but all forms of dictatorship."[64] In the protests' early days, EAOs were largely silent about the coup. The KIA, for instance, suggested that the coup would make little difference to its day-to-day operations.[65] Calls for interethnic solidarity were beginning to emerge, but they were not yet fully expressed, in part because no group had articulated a vision of the post-coup future around which various ethnicities could rally. One can characterize this first phase of the anti-coup movement as one of *diversity without coordinated demands*.

As crackdowns intensified, protesters shifted from simply demanding the end of junta rule to envisioning a federal future for Myanmar. This

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[62] The first rally in Yangon on 6 February 2021 was led by two young women, Esther Ze Naw and Ei Thinzar Maung, wearing shirts associated with Karen people; Kyed, "Hopes for a New Democracy in Myanmar".

[63] Khin Khin Mra, "Myanmar's Coup from the Eyes of Ethnic Minorities", *New Mandala*, 22 February 2021, https://www.newmandala.org/myanmars-coup-from-the-eyes-of-ethnic-minorities (accessed 11 May 2021); see also Jap, "Protesters and Bystanders".

[64] Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, "Myanmar Politics Must Be Remade, not Restored", *Frontier Myanmar,* 24 February 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/myanmar-politics-must-be-re-made-not-restored/ (accessed 11 May 2021).

[65] Joe Kumbun, "Why Is the Kachin Independence Organization Keeping Silent on the Myanmar's Coup?", *The Diplomat*, 11 February 2021, https://thediplomat.com/2021/02/why-is-the-kachin-independence-organization-keeping-silent-on-the-myanmar-coup/ (accessed 17 April 2021).

evolution occurred in tandem with the CRPH's attempts at rapprochement with various EAOs. Lawmakers ousted by the coup, acting on the basis of their electoral mandate, established the CRPH on 8 February. Initially, the committee had little effect on non-Bamar groups' sentiments towards the anti-coup movement; fifteen of its seventeen members were from the NLD. Thus, criticisms levelled against the NLD government, for its inattention to the grievances of conflict-affected populations, seemed likely to apply to the CRPH. However, on 5 March, the CRPH released a statement detailing its "political visions", and began negotiating with EAOs, signalling the start of a second phase in the evolution of the anti-coup movement, characterized by collectively discussing *visions of a federal future*. On 17 March, the CRPH decriminalized all EAOs, and declared the Tatmadaw a "terrorist organization". Two weeks later, the CRPH abolished the 2008 Constitution and released its Federal Democracy Charter. The twenty-page charter draws on an interim constitution drafted by the NLD and EAOs in Myanmar's borderlands between 1990 and 2008.[66] It sets out a roadmap for creating a Union in which "democracy is exercised and equal rights and self-determination is [*sic*] guaranteed" for "all ethnic nationalities".[67] The CRPH supposedly conceived of this roadmap in consultation with several EAOs and political organizations, which remained unnamed.[68]

During this phase of the anti-coup movement, some EAOs began to take on a more active role. As crackdowns intensified, EAOs provided

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[66] *Myanmar Now*, "CRPH Announces Lineup of Interim National Unity Government", 16 April 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/myanmar-politics-must-be-re-made-not-restored/ (accessed 11 May 2021).

[67] Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), "Federal Democracy Charter" [English-language version], CRPH, p. 3, https://crphmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/Federal-Democracy-Charter-English.pdf (accessed 18 April 2021).

[68] U Yee Mon, "Shadow Government Outlines Federal Union Plan for Myanmar's Future", *The Irrawaddy*, 5 April 2021, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/shadow-government-outlines-federal-union-plan-myanmars-future.html (accessed 11 May 2021).

security for protesters. The KNU was the earliest to do so, vowing to protect protesters, marching alongside them, and offering them food and water in Karen State in late February.[69] By late March, "hundreds" of demonstrators had also sought shelter in KNU territory.[70] Further, some EAOs declared their support for the anti-coup movement, including the KNU, the RCSS, and the KIO. The former two organizations denounced the coup in February, and in early April, issued a joint statement in support of the CRPH's charter as part of a bloc of ten NCA signatories.[71] At first, the KIO was unwilling to comment on the coup, but it changed tack in mid-February, releasing a statement in support of anti-coup protests.[72] Finally, in mid-March, EAOs began to engage with the CRPH. Joe Kumbun, a long-time pseudonymous political analyst, explained that the KIO's initial silence was likely to be due to the fact that the "exact coloration of Myanmar's elected government—whether NLD or otherwise—was simply not that important for the KIO."[73] However, a

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[69] Karen Information Centre, "KNU Vows to Protect Anti-Coup Protesters – but to Avoid Violence Will not Involve in Protest with Weapons", *Burma News International*, 26 February 2021, https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/knu-vows-protect-anti-coup-protestors-avoid-violence-will-not-involve-protest-weapons (accessed 11 May 2021).

[70] According to Saw Tah Doh Moo, general secretary of the KNU; see AFP, "Myanmar's Rebel Areas Brace for Thousands Fleeing Unrest", *Frontier Myanmar*, 25 March 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/myanmars-rebel-areas-brace-for-thousands-fleeing-unrest (accessed 11 May 2021).

[71] AFP, "NCA-Signatory Armed Groups Back Anti-Coup Protests", *Frontier Myanmar*, 4 April 2021 (https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/myanmar-rebel-groups-back-anti-coup-protests-condemn-junta-crackdown (accessed 11 May 2021).

[72] *Kachin News Group*, "KIO General Secretary La Nan: The Main Problem Is the 2008 Constitution", 19 February 2021, https://kachinnews.com/2021/02/19/kio-general-secretary-la-nan-the-main-problem-is-the-2008-constitution (accessed 11 May 2021).

[73] Joe Kumbun, "Why is the Kachin Independence Organization Keeping Silent on the Myanmar Coup?".

shift in protesters' demands—towards scrapping the 2008 Constitution and away from the reinstatement of the NLD's electoral victory—could have moved the KIO towards some measure of support for the anti-coup movement.[74] Similarly, some members of the KNU have cautioned engagement with the Union government so long as the 2008 Constitution is in place.[75] Therefore, the CRPH's move to annul the 2008 Constitution on 31 March provided an opening through which EAOs could participate in collectively envisioning a federal future for Myanmar.

The third phase in the evolution of the anti-coup movement is still in its early days. This stage is characterized by various actors moving past envisioning a federal future to their *agitating for change*. This phase began in mid-April, when the CRPH announced the formation of the National Unity Government (NUG)—a government-in-exile consisting of twenty-six cabinet members, including thirteen belonging to non-Bamar groups. Soon afterwards, the NUG's newly appointed defence minister indicated his intention to form a professional "people's defence force" to "safeguard the federal democratic union we are trying to establish". This defence force would seek collaboration with EAOs.[76] His announcement occurred in the context of a growing appetite for militarization among protesters, and an increase in popular support for EAOs. Demonstrators in ethnic areas were reportedly seeking military training from EAOs, "fed up with seeing peaceful demonstrations met

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[74] The KIO's general secretary, La Nan, later stated that "the main problem is the 2008 Constitution. Regardless of whosoever in power, under this constitution they will become a dictator", see Kachin News Group, "KIO General Secretary La Nan".

[75] Brenner, "Rebel Politics". Karen civil society organizations share this sentiment; see Karen Peace Support Network, "Burma's Dead-End Peace Negotiation Process", Burma Campaign UK, 2018, https://burmacampaign.org.uk/media/KPSN-report.pdf (accessed 19 April 2021).

[76] "Parallel Myanmar Government Launched to Challenge Military Junta", *Radio Free Asia*, 16 April 2021, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/crph-government-04162021185851.html (accessed 11 May 2021).

with violence".[77] Demonstrators with less access to EAOs were using locally made weapons, purchasing firearms, and organizing themselves for purposes of self-defence.[78] On 22 April, *Al Jazeera* reported pro-KIA protests in Kachin State and in central Myanmar[79]—an unprecedented situation since the Union government outlawed the KIA, which has no ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw at the moment.

Calls for militarization mark a fundamental shift in the role of EAOs in the anti-coup movement. The CRPH has no army, whereas EAOs have maintained armed forces. As such, there have been widespread calls among protesters for a banner under which EAOs can cooperate to weaken the Tatmadaw while demonstrators continue to wear down the junta administration.[80] Even though the number of Tatmadaw soldiers significantly outnumbers the combined total of EAO troops—by 350,000 to 80,000—a multifronted conflict in urban areas and across Myanmar's

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[77] Emily Fishbein, Nu Nu Lusan, and Jaw Tu Hkawng, "The Last Fight: With Growing Support for Federal Army, Kachin Prepares for War", *Frontier Myanmar*, 3 April 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-last-fight-with-growing-support-for-federal-army-kachin-prepares-for-war (accessed 11 May 2021).

[78] *Frontier Myanmar*, "The 'Tumi Revolution': Protesters Fight Back in Sagaing Region", 13 April 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-tumi-revolution-protesters-fight-back-in-sagaing-region (accessed 11 May 2021).

[79] Emily Fishbein, Nu Nu Lusan, and Zau Myet Awng, "Military Coup Clouds Control Over Jades, Gems, in Myanmar", *Al Jazeera*, 22 April 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/22/myanmar-militarys-lucrative-jade-industry (accessed 11 May 2021).

[80] Philipp Annawitt, "Myanmar's Blood-Soaked Fight for a Federal Future", *Asia Times*, 12 April 2021, https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/myanmars-blood-soaked-fight-for-a-federal-future (accessed 11 May 2021); and Steve Sandford, "Ethnic Armed Organizations Building Unity with Myanmar Anti-Coup Activists", *Voice of America*, 23 April 2021, https://www.voanews.com/east-asia-pacific/ethnic-armed-organizations-building-unity-myanmar-anti-coup-activists (accessed 11 May 2021).

borderlands is likely to pose "a very, very significant problem for the Tatmadaw".[81]

On 5 May 2021, the NUG declared that the "people's defence force" had been set up, as a precursor to establishing a "federal union army", which would bring anti-coup protesters and EAOs together into a unified front against the Tatmadaw.[82] The Federal Army is not a new idea. During peace negotiations, NCA signatories demanded that the Tatmadaw reform itself into a "Federal Union Armed Forces" under civilian control.[83] Unsurprisingly, the Tatmadaw blocked this demand, which did not gain much traction among the Myanmar public either. The current phase in the evolution of the anti-coup movement thus presents an opportunity—however tentative—to achieve the kinds of cooperation previously envisioned by non-Bamar groups. As such, the anti-coup movement seems to be reaching a conclusion drawn long ago by EAOs,

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[81] Anthony Davis, "Myanmar Military Versus Ethnic Armies Would Be a 'David and Goliath' Contest", *Radio Free Asia*, 8 April 2021, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/david-and-goliath-04082021165355.html (accessed 11 May 2021). More recently, a defecting Tatmadaw major estimated that only 200,000 Tatmadaw soldiers were battle-ready; see Major Hein Thaw Oo, "Interview: 'Military Leaders Are Afraid of Letting Their Power Go'", *Radio Free Asia*, 20 April 2021, https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/hein-thaw-oo-04202021170420.html (accessed 11 May 2021).

[82] It is unclear how members of the "people's defence force" are acquiring military training. AFP, "Unity Govt Announces 'People's Defence Force", *Frontier Myanmar*, 5 May 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/unity-govt-announces-peoples-defence-force/ (accessed 11 May 2021).

[83] Ardeth Maung Thawnghmung and Saw Eh Htoo, "The Fractured Centre: 'Two-Headed Government' and Threats to the Peace Process in Myanmar", *Modern Asian Studies* (2021), https://doi.org/10.1017/S0026749X20000372. Prior to the NCA, a bloc of EAOs known as the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC) also planned to create a Federal Union Army. However, these plans did not come to fruition, and the UNFC eventually fragmented. See Paul Keenan, "All-Inclusiveness in an Ethnic Context", *EBO Background Paper* no. 4/2015, http://eprpinformation.org/files/recent-events/All-Inclusiveness-in-an-Ethnic-Context--EBO-Aug2015.pdf (accessed 12 May 2021).

civil society organizations, and borderland populations: that negotiations without force are unlikely to create a chink in the Tatmadaw's armour. In this vein, and as subsequent sections of this paper demonstrate, an analysis of Myanmar's faltering peace process has much to offer to those seeking to overcome junta rule.

The third phase of the anti-coup movement unfolds amidst continued crackdowns in urban areas and escalating conflict between the EAOs and the Tatmadaw in Myanmar's borderlands. On 27 March, the Tatmadaw launched its first aerial attacks on KNU areas in twenty years.[84] These attacks displaced more than 20,000 villagers and killed twenty-one civilians.[85] In areas claimed by the KIO, fighting has spread to numerous townships close to the China border, including in areas that had been relatively calm.[86] At the same time, Myanmar's major cities increasingly

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[84] AFP, "Wounded Myanmar Refugees Tell of Airstrike Horror", *Frontier Myanmar*, 31 March 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/wounded-myanmar-refugees-tell-of-air-strike-horror (accessed 11 May 2021). For more details on the aerial attacks, see Karen Human Rights Group, "Karen Human Rights Group Condemns State Administration Council's Targeted Attacks on Civilian Populations", *Karen Human Rights Group*, 30 March 2021, https://www.khrg.org/2021/03/karen-human-rights-group-condemns-state-administration-council%E2%80%99s-targeted-attacks-civilian (accessed 19 April 2021).

[85] Although shelling began in areas controlled by KNLA Brigade 5, shelling has also been reported in Brigade 3 and Brigade 6 areas; *Karen News*, "Burma Military Attacks Continue, Killing Another Mutraw District Villager", 12 April 2021, http://karennews.org/2021/04/burma-military-attacks-continue-killing-another-mutraw-district-villager/ (accessed 19 April 2021) and *Myanmar Now*, "Military Assault on Karen Villages Spreads to Mon State", 8 April 2021, https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/military-assault-on-karen-villages-spreads-to-mon-state-knu-says (accessed 11 May 2021).

[86] David Scott Mathieson, "The Rebels Who Will and Won't Fight Myanmar's Coup", *Asia Times*, 31 March 2021, https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/the-rebels-who-will-and-wont-fight-myanmars-coup (accessed 11 May 2021); and Free Burma Rangers, "Kachin State Clash Report, 1–6 April 2021", *Free Burma Rangers*, 9 April 2021, https://www.freeburmarangers.org/2021/04/09/kachin-state-clash-report-1-6-april-2021/ (accessed 19 April 2021).

resemble battlefields. The use of live ammunition has been reported in more than forty locations in a single day.[87] Sections of Yangon have hollowed out, as the Tatmadaw cracks down on the urban poor, who have vociferously opposed the coup.[88]

The present similarities between the experiences of urban protesters and borderland populations create a critical juncture, from which a broad-based, interethnic coalition comprising the NUG, the EAOs, civil society, and protesters might emerge.[89] This juncture also demands careful assessment of centre-periphery relations in Myanmar. Previous attempts at forging solidarity across ethnic lines have fallen apart because of a failure of relational thinking. Actors have, under the banner of "democratization", often mistakenly cast their lot with the centre, achieving seeming progress in the hallways of Naypyitaw while consigning the country's borderlands to cycles of conflict, therefore augmenting the Tatmadaw's power.

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[87] *BBC News*, "Dozens Killed as Army Opens Fire on Protesters on Deadliest Day", 27 March 2021, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-56546920 (accessed 11 May 2021).

[88] On 14 March, the Tatmadaw cracked down on Hlaing Tharyar, an industrial area populated mostly by internal migrants forced out of Ayeyarwaddy Region after Cyclone Nargis, which struck Myanmar in 2008. More than fifty people were killed. The next day, residents fled the area. See " 'I Never Thought Gangsters Cried': Hlaing Tharyar Locals Shaken by Defiant", *Frontier Myanmar*, 19 March 2021, https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/i-never-thought-gangsters-cried-hlaing-tharyar-locals-shaken-but-defiant (accessed 11 May 2021).

[89] Terese Gagnon and Andrew Paul, "Myanmar Has Never Been a Nation. Can It Become One Now?", *Al Jazeera*, 10 April 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/4/10/myanmar-has-never-been-a-nation-could-it-become-one-now (accessed 11 May 2021); and Zung Ring (pseud.), "Is Myanmar's Spring Revolution Winnable? The Role of the CRPH and EAOs in the Revolution", *Tea Circle*, 21 April 2021, https://teacircleoxford.com/2021/04/21/is-the-myanmars-spring-revolution-winnable-the-role-of-crph-and-the-eaos-in-the-revolution (accessed 11 May 2021).

CENTRE-PERIPHERY RELATIONS IN THE ANTI-COUP MOVEMENT: THREE PRECEDENTS

This section highlights three ways in which the success of Myanmar anti-coup movement depends on solidarity among ethnic groups. One can summarize these as: (1) *refuge*; (2) *non-state social services*; and (3) *shared experiences of violence*. This section analyses precedents for each of these from the vantage point of Karen State. It illustrates that using the past to understand the highly contested nature of centre-periphery relations in the present is crucial to ensuring that the anti-coup movement does not reinstate centralized power. Furthermore, these precedents show that the transformation of centre-periphery relations in Myanmar is a task with roles for both domestic and international actors.

Refuge

Of Myanmar's five international borders, only those with Thailand and India are viable crossing points for individuals seeking refuge. Myanmar's border with India has reportedly received dozens of defecting policemen.[90] However, the sanctuary of choice for leaders of the anti-coup movement—including well-known activists and ousted NLD members—has been KNU areas close to the Thai border. These areas have received "hundreds" of people escaping the junta's crackdown, with expectations that thousands more will join them.[91]

This is not the first time that the Thai border has served as a space of sanctuary for those fleeing the Tatmadaw. After the Tatmadaw's crackdown on protests in 1988, at least 5,000 student activists took shelter in KNU areas.[92] They formed several well-known organizations

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[90] Mathieson, "Ethnic Armies Rescue Myanmar's Democratic Forces".

[91] AFP, "Myanmar's Rebel Areas Brace for Thousands Seeking Unrest".

[92] Jack Fong, *Revolution as Development: The Karen Self-Determination Struggle against Ethnocracy (1949–2004)* (Boca Raton, Florida: BrownWalker Press, 2008).

from the Thai border, including the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB), which acted as the Burmese government-in-exile between 1990 and 2012.[93] There are clear parallels between the function of the NCGUB in the 1990s and the NUG today. In serving as a multiethnic hub for dissidents—a "second centre of politics"—in the early 1990s, KNU areas sheltered not only Karen and Bamar people, but also Chin, Arakanese, Mon and Shan individuals collaborating to challenge junta rule.[94] Commentators wonder if KNU areas today can again serve as a base for consolidating anti-coup efforts.[95]

Refuge in KNU-controlled borderland areas is crucial to the movement in two respects. First, those areas provide safety for key leaders of the movement. The CRPH is thought to be operating from KNU-controlled areas, along with other locations—including the Indian border and covert sites within the country. The coup regime has outlawed the CRPH and accused two of its members of high treason, which carries the death penalty.[96] Hence, the protection that the KNU has extended to high-risk individuals is crucial to the continued operation of the CRPH and its leading role in the anti-coup movement. Second, while in KNU areas, Bamar leaders of the anti-coup movement could develop greater empathy for the grievances of borderland populations. However, on this point, there are few hopeful precedents. In the 2000s, KNU leaders were aggrieved when the NCGUB—then the government-in-exile—failed to accommodate its goals, even while the KNU was sheltering its members. In the words of Bo Mya, then the chairman of the KNU,

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[93] In 1995, after the KNU's headquarters at Manerplaw fell to the Tatmadaw, the NCGUB moved its headquarters to the United States. The NCGUB disbanded in 2012, after the NLD's success at by-elections in that year; see Smith, *Burma*, p. 408, and Nanda, "A Champion of Democracy Returns to His Motherland", *Frontier Myanmar*, 14 September 2019.

[94] Smith, *Burma*, p. 444; civil society actor, interview with the author, Thai border town, 26 March 2019.

[95] Mathieson, "Ethnic Armies Rescue Myanmar's Democratic Forces".

[96] *The Irrawaddy*, "Myanmar Regime Charges Rival Vice President with High Treason", 18 March 2019, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-charges-rival-vice-president-high-treason.html (accessed 18 April 2021).

> We thought that it would be good to have Burmans in the revolution fighting against the military regime, a common enemy. So we helped them in every way. We Karen had to feed 5,000 of them for at least one and a half months … After that experience came the [NCGUB] … We thought we would be included, but we were not. As we are rebels and they the "government," they said, "both the government and the rebels cannot work together.[97]

More broadly, the NCGUB portended three problematic aspects of NLD rule: the unquestioned leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, an unwillingness to criticize the Tatmadaw, and a reluctance to address ethnic differences.[98] Critics have noted the effects of the NLD government's failure to demonstrate moral responsibility for ongoing ethnic conflicts in alienating non-Bamar voters.[99]

Both the NCGUB and the NLD missed opportunities to build interethnic solidarity and instead entrenched the sense that parliamentary politics could not meaningfully address the grievances of non-Bamar groups. They thus reinforced long-standing cycles of conflict between Myanmar's centre and periphery.

It is imperative that the anti-coup movement not replicate the missteps of the NCGUB and the NLD. International actors also figure in this situation. By framing Myanmar's "transition" as a matter of democracy rather than reconciliation, and by backing a problematic peace process, international actors have been complicit in generating cycles of ethnic

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[97] Fong, *Revolution as Development*, pp. 319–20. The author's own interviews also indicate that tensions between members of the KNU and the NCGUB grew increasingly inflamed between 1990, when the NCGUB was set up, and 1995, when the KNU's headquarters at Manerplaw fell to the Tatmadaw.

[98] J.J. Rose, "Myanmar's Skewed Democracy Was Predictable", *The Interpreter*, 27 November 2018, https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/myanmar-skewed-democracy-was-predictable (accessed 11 May 2021).

[99] Kyaw Lynn, "The National League for Democracy: A Party for Democracy or Federalism?", *Transnational Institute*, 2 October 2020, https://www.tni.org/en/article/the-national-league-for-democracy-a-party-for-democracy-or-federalism (accessed 11 May 2021).

conflict.[100] EAOs, including the KNU, have resisted disarmament not because they insist on retaining the title of "rebels", but because the country's central government—military-led or not—has continually failed to listen to their concerns.[101] There are, however, early signs that the anti-coup movement is moving past this stalemate.

First among such signs was the CRPH's decriminalization of EAOs on 17 March. This move demonstrated a willingness to engage with EAOs as political organizations, with legitimate claims to represent their respective ethnic groups, rather than as insurgents.[102] Second, the Federal Democracy Charter drafted by the CRPH mentions "self-determination" for "member states" several times.[103] Previous Union governments shunted talk of self-determination out of the peace process, deeming it anathema to national unity.[104] Therefore, the CRPH's charter represents a significant concession to EAOs, which see self-determination as the right of each ethnic group to govern its own areas and affairs.[105] Finally, ousted NLD lawmakers began to publicly acknowledge their failures to represent borderland populations. On 23 April 2021, Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe—a former NLD member of parliament, a minister appointed to the NUG, and an ethnic Karen—

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[100] Brenner and Schulman, "Myanmar's Top-Down Transition: Challenges for Civil Society".

[101] Historical evidence shows that the KNU did not plan on resorting to armed struggle, but did so when all other non-violent options were exhausted. See Giulia Garbagni and Matthew J. Walton, "Imagining Kawthoolei: Strategies of Petitioning for Karen Statehood in Burma in the First Half of the 20th Century", *Nations and Nationalism* 26, no. 3 (2020): 759–74.

[102] Previously, the decriminalization of EAOs was conditional: the NLD government only removed NCA signatories from its list of unlawful associations.

[103] Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), "Federal Democracy Charter", p. 4.

[104] Matthew J. Walton, "The Disciplining Discourse of Unity in Burmese Politics", *Journal of Burma Studies*, 19, no. 1 (2015): 1–26.

[105] The KNU, for instance, deems pursuing the "rights of equality and self-determination for the Karen people" as its foremost objective. See KNU, "About KNU", *Karen National Union Headquarters*, 2019, https://www.knuhq.org/en/about/objectives (accessed 22 April 2021).

issued an apology that non-Bamar groups met with cautious celebration. "In the last government," she said, "we did not do well on ethnic issues, and neglected voices from the ethnic areas. I personally apologize for that."[106] This apology may represent a first step in transforming centre-periphery relations,[107] if followed by sincere attempts to involve EAOs, ethnic civil society organizations, and borderland populations in NUG decision-making.

The CRPH's dual pursuit of self-determination and unity—evident in the term "National Unity Government"—may be a break from the past. To realize that break, international actors should not overlook the place of borderland actors in ongoing efforts to overcome junta rule. They should not see Myanmar's borderlands as being peripheral to the central state, or as areas characterized by underdevelopment and violence, but as sites of refuge—places vital to dissidents' ability to imagine a future marked by solidarity rather than conflict.

Non-State Social Services

Media portrayals of the 1 February coup evoke a country sliding into disorder. Myanmar has been described as a "looming catastrophe", "Asia's next failed state", and "on the precipice of civil war".[108] Such

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[106] ASEAN Parliamentarians for Human Rights, "Press Conference on the ASEAN Myanmar Summit", uploaded on 22 April 2021, Facebook Live video, https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=792966301605507&ref=watch_permalink (accessed 23 April 2021).

[107] There is a growing body of literature on the role of political apologies in transforming post-conflict societies. See, for instance, Kora Andrieu, "'Sorry for the Genocide': How Public Apologies Can Help Promote National Reconciliation", *Millennium* 38, no. 1 (2009): 3–23.

[108] Derek J. Mitchell, "The Looming Catastrophe in Myanmar", *Foreign Policy*, 15 April 2021, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/burma-myanmar/2021-04-15/looming-catastrophe-myanmar (accessed 11 May 2021); Lucas Myers, "Myanmar Is on the Precipice of Civil War", *Foreign Policy*, 8 April 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/04/08/myanmar-military-coup-ethnic-armed-organizations-civil-war (accessed 11 May 2021); and *The Economist*, "Myanmar Could Be Asia's Next Failed State", 17 April 2021, https://www.economist.com/leaders/2021/04/15/myanmar-could-be-asias-next-failed-state (accessed 11 May 2021).

portrayals are unhelpful to the task of building interethnic solidarity against junta rule. For one, the idea that the coup has precipitated a civil war ignores long-standing borderland conflicts in the country. The conflict between the KNU and the Tatmadaw, which began in 1949, is arguably the world's longest civil war.[109] In addition, by foregrounding chaos and disorder, these portrayals of crisis ignore the role of non-state actors in providing social services to dissidents and conflict-affected populations.

Scholarly literature demonstrates that while invocations of a "failed state" can draw attention to the severity of a crisis, they also legitimize external interventions that override the role of local actors in resolving a conflict.[110] Literature also shows that rebel groups can provide security, protection, and positive identification for local inhabitants.[111] In Myanmar, the CRPH, civil society organizations, and volunteer groups are offering social services to those involved in the anti-coup movement. However, it is possible to trace the role of non-state actors in offering social services in Myanmar back further, to the role of EAOs in providing social services to conflict-affected populations. It is vital that the CRPH and protesters recognize the social services offered by EAOs, and that outside actors support the anti-coup movement's efforts to provide social protections delinked from the coup regime.

The CRPH is striving to build a parallel "public administration program" across Myanmar. A survey found that the CRPH has established local councils in over 60 per cent of Myanmar's 360

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[109] Naw Hsa Moo and Dillabough-Lefebvre, "While Myanmar's Cities Become Military Occupations, Conflict Persists in the Ethnic Borderlands".

[110] See, for instance, Pinar Bilgin and Adam David Morton, "Historicising Representations of 'Failed States' Beyond the Cold-War Annexation of the Social Sciences?", *Third World Quarterly* 23, no. 1 (2002): 55–80; and Pierre Englebert and Denis M. Tull, "Postconflict Reconstruction in Africa: Flawed Ideas about Failed States", *International Security* 32, no. 4 (2008): 106–39.

[111] Ana Arjona, *Rebelocracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Brenner, *Rebel Politics*; and Stephen C. Lubkemann, *Culture in Chaos: An Anthropology of the Social Condition in War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

townships, and that these councils are concentrated in NLD strongholds such as Yangon, Mandalay, and Sagaing Regions.[112] The need to protect local intermediaries means that a full picture of the CRPH's public administration system is unlikely to emerge. However, it is possible to draw some preliminary conclusions. First, the CRPH aspires to provide "public services that the [current] junta cannot or will not".[113] Strikes have significantly disrupted the healthcare system, with an estimated one-third of Myanmar's hospitals closed by late February.[114] In fact, many doctors refusing to work with the regime are providing free medical services, in an effort "strongly aligned with the CRPH".[115] This parallel administration is crucial to ensuring populations' access to basic social services as Myanmar's crisis wears on. At the same time, the CRPH's parallel administration will succeed only if striking civil servants and volunteers can access funds for food and daily provisions. The targeted sanctions on the Tatmadaw imposed by various countries are crucial to draining resources away from it, but it is also necessary to redirect resources in support of parallel administration systems in response to a potential humanitarian crisis.[116]

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[112] Philipp Annawitt and Moe Hteet, "Democratic Shadow Government Taking Form in Myanmar" *Asia Times*, 11 March 2021, https://asiatimes.com/2021/03/democratic-shadow-government-taking-form-in-myanmar/ (accessed 11 May 2021); and Phillipp Annawitt, "Parallel Government Taking Shape in Myanmar", *Asia Times*, 4 April 2021, https://asiatimes.com/2021/04/parallel-government-taking-firm-shape-in-myanmar (accessed 11 May 2021).

[113] Annawitt, "Parallel Government Taking Shape in Myanmar".

[114] *The Irrawaddy*, "Myanmar Regime Steps up Arrests of Doctors as Strike Movement Takes Toll", 19 April 2021, https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-steps-arrests-doctors-strike-movement-takes-toll.html (accessed 11 May 2021).

[115] Annawitt, "Parallel Government Taking Shape in Myanmar"; for more on the risks facing doctors, see *The Irrawaddy*, "Myanmar Regime Steps up Arrests of Doctors as Strike Movement Takes Toll".

[116] This is not without precedent. The Venezuelan opposition is now using funds frozen by the US government to embark on COVID-19 vaccination. Washington recognizes the opposition as the legitimate government of Venezuela; see *Reuters*, "Venezuela Opposition Approves $100 million in Frozen Funds for COVID-19 Vaccines", 23 April 2021, https://www.reuters.com/article/health-coronavirus-venezuela-vaccine-idUSL1N2MF3FF (accessed 11 May 2021).

Both international actors and the CRPH should recognize that EAOs provided social services to conflict-affected populations long before the coup. Recognizing this function of EAOs will pave the way for the decentralization of power in Myanmar and stem cycles of ethnic conflict that work to the Tatmadaw's advantage. Since 1974, the KNU has worked through fourteen line departments to organize social services in sectors like education, forestry, and health.[117] Initially, the KNU funded these departments through taxes on the border trade with Thailand;[118] however, in the 1990s, the KNU's social service systems began drawing funds from international aid donors after losing significant swaths of borderland territory. Either the KNU's line department or trusted NGOs directly managed these funds.[119]

The KNU has thus been able to develop a healthcare system in the areas that it controls, through the Karen Department of Health and Welfare (KDHW).[120] The KDHW oversees more than a thousand health workers that run fourteen programmes on, for example, malaria control, trauma management and immunization.[121] In the past decade, funds for the KDHW and its NGO partners have become stretched, as donors began to support national health reforms over borderland systems unrecognized by the Myanmar government.[122] At the same time, the 2012 KNU ceasefire

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[117] Kim Joliffe, "Ceasefires, Governance, and Development: The Karen National Union in Times of Change", The Asia Foundation, December 2016, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Ceasefires-Governance-and-Development-EN-Apr2017.pdf (accessed 11 May 2021), pp. 5, 17.

[118] Smith, *Burma.*

[119] Jolliffe, "Ceasefires, Governance, and Development", p. 30.

[120] The KDHW itself was founded in 1956; Kim Joliffe, "Ethnic Conflict and Social Services in Myanmar's Contested Regions", The Asia Foundation, June 2014, https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/ethnic-conflict-and-social-services-myanmar-s-contested-regions (accessed 11 May 2021), p. 36.

[121] KDHW, "Annual Report 2011", Karen Department of Health and Welfare, 2011.

[122] Décobert, " 'The Struggle Isn't Over' ".

catalysed talks and activities directed towards "convergence", or "the systematic, long-term alignment of government, ethnic, and community-based health services". These talks and activities were funded by several donors.[123] Anne Décobert's research found that state bureaucrats working with ethnic health systems to pursue universal health care coverage—an ostensibly "apolitical" goal—gained greater respect for those systems.[124] However, whereas ethnic health organizations saw convergence as "inextricably linked with a struggle for the devolution of powers through a federal government system", the Union government saw health care as a technical task and sought to retain existing power structures.[125]

It is notable that few of these small wins regarding the recognition of non-state actors in social service provision have been evident outside the realm of health. In comparatively "political" fields—such as education, land rights, and forestry—the relationship between KNU departments and their Union government counterparts is more antagonistic. The Union government continues to see EAOs as "rebels" rather than as political actors who provide social services and accrue legitimacy among borderland populations.

The social services that the CRPH provides are vital to the long-term viability of the anti-coup movement. However, the CRPH should also recognize that EAOs oversee established systems that support conflict-affected populations, and should not only pursue partnerships with

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[123] Convergence as defined by the Health Convergence Core Group, which comprises non-state healthcare providers associated with various ethnic groups, including the Karen; quoted in Bill Davis and Kim Jolliffe, "Achieving Health Equity in Contested Areas of Southeast Myanmar", The Asia Foundation, June 2016, p. 25, https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Achieving-health-equity-in-contested-corner-of-southeast-myanmar_ENG.pdf (accessed 11 May 2021).

[124] Anne Décobert, "Health as a Bridge to Peace in Myanmar's Kayin State: 'Working Encounters' for Community Development", *Third World Quarterly* 42, no. 2 (2021): 402–20.

[125] Ibid., p. 410.

EAOs when it is expedient—as leverage against the coup regime—but contribute to a future in which conflict-affected populations can access social services from borderland actors they trust. Correspondingly, international actors should resist framing Myanmar as a "failed state" in which all forms of social order have collapsed. Instead, international actors should strive to support non-state actors—such as the CRPH and EAOs—that offer crucial social services to civilians.

Shared Experiences of Violence

Ongoing crackdowns in urban areas provide an opening for solidarity that cuts across ethnic lines, grounded in people's shared experiences of state violence. However, optimism on these grounds must be tempered by a recognition that Myanmar "has not yet achieved a shared political imaginary among the numerous ethnic nationalities within its borders."[126] Indeed, previous crackdowns against urban populations—such as those following mass protests in 1988 and 2007—did not generate relations of solidarity between centre and periphery in Myanmar.[127] This time, international and domestic actors should support the process of building a broad-based coalition of the CRPH, EAOs, and civil society organizations, rather than just the CRPH itself. Upholding the CRPH or the NUG as a saviour of the state—as was the case with the NLD in the past—tends to re-entrench the dominance of the centre over the periphery. Borderland civil society organizations also deserve attention for their ability to check

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[126] Naw Hsa Moo and Dominique Dillabough-Lefebvre, "While Myanmar's Cities Become Military Occupations, Conflict Persists in the Ethnic Borderlands", Transnational Institute, 12 March 2021, https://www.tni.org/en/article/while-myanmars-cities-become-military-occupations-conflict-persists-in-the-ethnic (accessed 11 May 2021); and Terese Gagnon and Andrew Paul, "Myanmar Has Never Been a Nation".

[127] As mentioned above, thousands of mainly Bamar student activists fled to KNU areas after the 1988 crackdown. However, the government-in-exile's inability to recognize the role of EAOs in Myanmar's future soon marred nascent relations of solidarity.

the power of EAOs and to communicate the magnitude of the violence experienced by borderland populations to outsiders.

Commentators have highlighted the continuities between the Tatmadaw's crackdown on urban protesters and its Four Cuts counterinsurgency strategy, pursued against borderland populations since the 1960s.[128] However, the violence experienced by borderland populations differs from the Tatmadaw's crackdown on urban protesters on three counts. First, violence against borderland populations has continued over decades. Although the intensity of these conflicts has waxed and waned, generations of borderland inhabitants have considered armed violence an everyday reality. Second, violence against borderland populations is remarkable for the depth of its impact. It has resulted not only in the loss of lives, but also in the loss of cultural institutions, whereas Bamar-Buddhist institutions remain largely intact. Third, violence against borderland populated has been largely invisible. Borderland populations feel that institutions—such as democratic governments—whose role is to protect them have shunted their grievances aside. This invisibility produces its own kind of trauma.

In Karen State, reports between the 1980s and 2000s testify to the systematic destruction of Karen villages, regular instances of forced portering, and gender-based violence.[129] The 2012 KNU ceasefire and the 2015 NCA brought a reduction in—but not the elimination of—armed violence. In northern Karen State, lapses in the ceasefires have displaced thousands since 2016.[130] The March–April 2021 airstrikes in Karen

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[128] Francis Wade, "How Total Violence Has Become the Myanmar Military's Chosen Route to Power", *New Statesman*, 7 April 2021, https://www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2021/04/how-total-violence-has-become-myanmar-militarys-chosen-route-power (accessed 11 May 2021).

[129] Karen Human Rights Group, "Foundation of Fear: 25 Years of Villagers' Voices from Southeast Myanmar", October 2017, https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/foundation-fear-25-years-villagers-voices-southeast-myanmar (accessed 11 May 2021).

[130] KPSN, "The Nightmare Returns".

State thus represent an escalation of the conflict, but they are also part of an established pattern of violence that has persisted regardless of the ongoing peace process. Furthermore, the ceasefires created new forms of insecurity. An influx of business interests and conservation organizations since the KNU's bilateral ceasefire in 2012 has caused one in forty-seven households in southeast Myanmar to experience land grabs.[131] Land grabs can be understood as a form of "slow violence", defined as violence that has "delayed effects" such that both "the causes and the memory of catastrophe readily fade from view as the casualties incurred typically pass untallied and unremembered."[132] Borderland inhabitants experience land grabs as a delayed effect of ethnic conflict, and land grabs are rarely accounted for in optimistic mainstream accounts of Myanmar's peace process.[133]

The issue of land demonstrates the role of civil society organizations in areas controlled by EAOs, with implications for the anti-coup movement. Diana Suhardiman, John Bright and Casper Palmano argue that the Union government's policies on land have largely been unresponsive to the demands of borderland civil society organizations, resulting in land laws that facilitate land grabbing in conflict-affected areas.[134] In contrast, at least on paper, the KNU's land laws offer conflict-affected populations more protection. Karen civil society organizations—which were involved

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[131] Saferworld and Karen Peace Support Network, "Security, Justice and Governance in Southeast Myanmar", p. xiv; for more on green grabbing by conservation organizations, see Kevin M. Woods and Jared Naimark, "Conservation as Counterinsurgency: A Case of Ceasefire in a Rebel Forest in Southeast Myanmar", *Political Geography* 83 (2020): 102–51.

[132] The term "slow violence" is attributed to Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), p. 9.

[133] Karen Peace Support Network, "Burma's Dead-End Peace Negotiation Process".

[134] Diana Suhardiman, John Bright and Casper Palmano. "The Politics of Legal Pluralism in the Shaping of Spatial Power in Myanmar's Land Governance", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 2 (2021): 411–35.

in the KNU's policy-drafting committee and in consultation—ensured that "villagers' inputs and suggestions form an integral part of the KNU Land Policy, thus setting the policy apart from the central government's [land laws] in terms of political legitimacy".[135]

Civil society organizations are particularly attuned to borderland populations' experiences of slow violence, which EAOs may overlook. For example, in Karen State, the Karen Human Rights Group has documented the violence faced by borderland populations and communicated these to the wider world since 1992. The organization has continued to do so even after the ceasefires, through well-established networks of local researchers.[136] In addition, civil society organizations can check the power of EAOs. As mentioned earlier, Myanmar's peace process has been known to co-opt ethnic elites, including EAO leaders.[137] Civil society organizations lobbying on the behalf of borderland populations can ensure that EAOs remain accountable to the populations that they seek to represent. Finally, civil society organizations stand in a unique position to contribute to solidarity across difference. Whereas EAOs are, by definition, bound to representing particular ethnic groups, civil society organizations can build coalitions that span ethnic and class differences.[138]

In sum, civil society organizations' ability to understand, represent, and respond to borderland populations' experiences of slow violence is crucial both to ensuring that the anti-coup movement is responsive to these issues and to stemming cycles of ethnic conflict. Given the

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[135] Ibid., p. 421.

[136] Kevin Malseed, "Networks of Noncompliance: Grassroots Resistance and Sovereignty in Militarised Burma", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36, no. 2 (2009): 365–91.

[137] Brenner, *Rebel Politics*; Jap, "Protesters and Bystanders".

[138] For an account of how a civil society network dealt with ethnic, class, and other differences in Myanmar, see Doi Ra and Khu Khu Ju, "'Nothing About Us, Without Us': Reflections on the Challenges of Building Land in Our Hands, a National Land Network in Myanmar/Burma", *Journal of Peasant Studies* 48, no. 3 (2021): 497–516.

Tatmadaw's reliance on borderland economies as a source of revenue, civil society actors' ability to bring the ills of ceasefire capitalism to light is critical to ensuring that other actors understand the depth of Tatmadaw power. Furthermore, borderland civil society actors can check the power of EAOs, as EAOs become ever more central to the anti-coup movement's success. International actors seeking to support anti-coup efforts must recognize that a plurality of actors is critical to resolving the current crisis, including those that do not fit easily into liberal democratic models, such as EAOs and border-based civil society actors.

CONCLUSION

The 1 February 2021 Myanmar coup is an outcome of the way in which centre-periphery relations in Myanmar augment the Tatmadaw's dominance over national politics. Success for the anti-coup movement will depend on the extent to which it proves possible to reconfigure these centre-periphery relations in service to interethnic solidarity.

So far, the anti-coup movement has evolved over three broad phases. At first, protesters from diverse backgrounds marched to contest junta rule without making coordinated demands. In the second phase, an emergent dialogue between the CRPH and some EAOs allowed the anti-coup movement to begin envisioning a federal future. In an unprecedented concession to the demands of EAOs, the CRPH's Federal Democracy Charter recognizes that self-determination is not incompatible with the creation of a shared political imaginary among Myanmar's many ethnic groups.[139] The charter is neither finished nor infallible;[140] however, it represents an opening for the reconfiguration of centre-periphery

[139] CRPH, "Federal Democracy Charter", p. 3.

[140] One issue with the CRPH's charter is that it addresses "all ethnic nationalities of the Union"——a term that has historically excluded the Rohingya. See ibid., p. 3.

relations. Success in achieving that reconfiguration hinges on a third, still nascent phase, of the anti-coup movement. That phase will see the CRPH, EAOs, and other anti-coup actors sustaining the movement while agitating for change through coordinated efforts at armed struggle.

The extent to which Myanmar's anti-coup movement can build solidarity between heterogeneous—even antagonistic—actors will determine the leverage that it has over the coup regime. This paper reveals the need for, and the potential challenges to, solidarity-building through an analysis of three issues central to the anti-coup movement: refuge, non-state social services, and shared experiences of violence. It demonstrates that there are historical precedents for each, during which various actors' insistence on furthering the dominance of the centre over the periphery ultimately reinforced cycles of ethnic conflict. This analysis reveals the centrality of borderland actors—encompassing EAOs and civil society organizations—to anti-coup efforts.

International actors opposed to the coup should lend material and symbolic support to a plurality of actors. It is necessary to recognize EAOs as political actors and providers of social services. At the same time, borderland civil society organizations are critical to checking the power of EAOs, and ensuring that the anti-coup movement will redress the grievances of borderland populations. In particular, international actors should focus on three tasks. First, they should work to ensure that dialogue over the future envisioned by the anti-coup movement includes those historically excluded from decision-making in Myanmar, including borderland civil society actors, labour unions and refugee organizations. Second, they should support plural coalitions built across Myanmar's centre and peripheries, rather than focus solely on the CRPH. And third, international actors should support the provision of non-state social services, which allow protesters to persist in the face of crackdowns.

This critical juncture, at which interethnic solidarity and leverage against the coup are possible, may pass if crackdowns intensify. International actors should act quickly in response to this window for change. A number of actors have adopted a "wait and see" approach to the coup. These include several northern EAOs, such as the Arakan Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, as well as potential Tatmadaw

and police defectors.[141] They are hoping to side with an eventual victor, and have understandable doubts about the anti-coup movement's ability to offer them protection. By building leverage against the Tatmadaw, the anti-coup movement may win over prevaricating actors. Indeed, a defecting Tatmadaw major shed particular light on the importance of interethnic solidarity when he called for "unity among ethnic armed groups" and stated that defectors' participation in the anti-coup movement depends "how much of a guarantee they have for security for themselves and for their families".[142]

A failure to see Myanmar's centre and periphery as relationally constituted has already come at great cost—as demonstrated by decades of borderland conflicts, and by the political and economic clout that the Tatmadaw wields as a result. This juncture implies the need to learn from past missteps, to avoid reinstating centralized power, but it also holds unprecedented possibilities for envisioning a different future for the country.

[141] Mathieson, "Ethnic Armies Rescue Myanmar's Democratic Forces".

[142] Major General Hein Thaw Oo, "Interview: 'Military Leaders Are Afraid of Letting Their Power Go'".

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