Migration in Post-coup Myanmar: A Critical Determinant in Shaping the Country’s Future?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

• Since the February 2021 coup, migration—both internal and external—has taken on new importance in Myanmar, to the degree that this may be called a “Myanmar migration moment”.

• The reason for increases in migration is clear: security concerns.

• Migrants driven out of the country in the aftermath of the coup have reinforced the existing populations of migrants abroad and in some liberated areas in their determination to topple the junta.

• Migration also plays a critical role in the power politics of electoral processes in Myanmar. This current migration trend, which could be more significant than earlier patterns of migration, will shape the political landscape in Myanmar now and in the future. It could also create conflict amidst heightened ethnic identity issues.

• Many young and energetic Rakhine migrants have returned to their homeland of Rakhine State as revolutionary soldiers. They are now pursuing the collective Arakan nationalist dream instead of their personal dreams of a better life outside the state.
INTRODUCTION

Since Myanmar’s February 2021 military coup, internal and external migration has become a pronounced form of social mobilization. A key reason is very clear: security concerns. Many Myanmar people have been forced to go into hiding, while others have fled to avoid atrocities committed by the State Administration Council (SAC) regime. In addition, many people have chosen to migrate in order to prepare to fight back against the regime in various ways. Some have also emigrated in order to survive economically since many businesses have been closed down in Myanmar, which has suffered the compounded impacts of the coup and Covid-19. In all, hundreds of thousands of Myanmar migrants have been on the move in quite a short period. This condition could be called a “Myanmar migration moment”.

In fact, migration will continue until political and economic stability returns to the country. This will be hard, and will require a political settlement that brings peace to Myanmar.¹ The implication is that Myanmar’s migration moment could prove lasting and that it could have serious impacts on Myanmar’s political, social and economic landscape now, in the near future, and in the long term. This migration could utterly reshape Myanmar.

TRADITIONAL MIGRATION VS. MIGRATION RESULTING FROM THE COUP

Migration is not in any way new to Myanmar. A well-known Myanmar proverb on migration refers to the benefits of moving where there is clear water and (fresh) green grass. The proverb refers to the condition in which people need to migrate to new areas simply in order to make a better life. Myanmar society has a culture of mobility. A 2019 survey taken across Ayeyarwaddy and Mandalay Regions and Rakhine and Shan States found that approximately a quarter of all households surveyed had at least one migrant member.² However, these findings relate to conventional migrants, who migrate internally or externally to ensure a better life. The major drivers behind conventional migration are economic. Natural disaster is also a key driver for migration. Cyclone Nargis, which struck Myanmar in May 2008, created, for instance, many migrants from the Delta region to Yangon and other areas.³
Myanmar has been in political turmoil for a long time. The nation’s economic and social policies have not been sound enough to overcome the hardships that people face, above all compared to the policies adopted in neighbouring countries. Those Myanmar people who live close to the country’s borders with its neighbours can easily make migration journeys to enjoy better economic and social conditions. Those who make such a journey are people residing in ethnic areas close to Thailand, China and even Laos. People in the Bamar heartlands like the Ayeyarwaddy Region also migrate through those ethnic areas en route to neighbouring countries. Potential Myanmar migrants move to these same destinations since they already have affiliations with family or friends there.

Following the 2021 coup, this conventional migration pattern has shifted. Warfare has intensified across many areas, including the heartland areas of Myanmar. New migration drivers have dramatically emerged, among them forced migration or displacement. Three key categories of people involved in such migration are a) those who were directly involved in the anti-coup movement, b) those who were not directly involved but supported it, as through participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and other forms of popular resistance, and c) those whom the SAC regime considers politically suspicious. The resulting pattern of displacement contrasts with what happened in previous decades. Political motivation is a crucial driver in this regard. Destinations for migrants are also new. The present choice of destination is for a place that offers safety; it has nothing to do with the considerations that previously drove internal and external migrations, or with ties to family or friends. The usual destinations now are the liberated areas controlled by ethnic armed organizations. Groups active in the liberated areas have apparently attempted to render them ‘really’ liberated in practice. For instance, the Karen National Union announced in February 2022 that all civil servants under the military junta working in some KNU-controlled areas like Hpapun Township, Kayin State, must leave. This challenge drew a migration line, which signaled a welcome to those who were not safe (or felt they were not safe) in regime-controlled areas. This was a critical moment for Myanmar’s internal migration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GDP per capita (US$)/2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>10,434</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>1,927</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>7,187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>1,961</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laos</td>
<td>2,629</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myanmar</td>
<td>1,467</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In view of these data, it is no surprise that people from Myanmar, with the lowest GDP per capita among neighbouring countries, will emigrate for economic reasons in particular. Source: World Bank

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MIGRATION IN THE SPRING REVOLUTION

Following the coup, the Spring Revolution became a watershed in Myanmar’s modern history. Unlike other Myanmar revolutions such as the 1988 Uprising and the 2007 Saffron Revolution, this revolution has a concrete advantage—in the form of migration. In comparison with the present, during the decades of those earlier uprisings against military rule fewer Myanmar people were migrants living abroad. The country had isolated itself, and leaving was difficult. The country’s isolation itself was a political tool ensuring that very few people had the chance to witness the progress and prosperity of other countries. Seeing those countries might be a wake-up call to political mobilization inside Myanmar. Over the decade of democratic transition from 2011-2021, Myanmar people were able to migrate more easily and with fewer costs. This condition has resulted in a sizeable Myanmar migrant population abroad, almost everywhere in the world. There are, for example, an estimated 3 million Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand, which hosts Myanmar people as the greatest percentage of international migrants of any single country. These migrants understand that Myanmar has been mismanaged, and that this mismanagement has forced it to be a poorer nation than it needs to be. They can easily compare it with the countries in which they now reside. Understanding this, they are impelled to do something for Myanmar. The best way for them to contribute to Myanmar’s Spring Revolution is to support it in forms that include financial support. In a reflection of such support, the first budget of the National Unity Government (NUG) includes US$700 million in spending, from sources ranging from an international crowdfunding campaign to a covert lottery that is expected to bring in about US$8.4 million per month from domestic and international buyers. In addition, the NUG sold more than US$6 million worth of bonds in less than 12 hours in late November 2021. The victory of Myanmar’s Spring Revolution will depend on the financing that it receives. In this regard, Myanmar migrants all over the world play a vital role, given that those inside the country are facing difficulties such as frozen bank accounts and arbitrary arrests for supporting the NUG and its resistance forces. This same factor also means that the revolution will keep going, thanks to the sizeable number of Myanmar migrants inside and outside the country. As an example of migration in response to revolution, the Rakhine is exceptional. In the few years before the coup, many Rakhines migrated. Since the coup, they have supported the campaign against the military regime both with monetary donations and through direct participation in warfare against the regime’s troops. For instance, many young Rakhine migrants like those in China have joined the Arakan Army (AA), fighting against the regime’s forces under the inspiration of AA’s “Arakan Dream” or “Way of Rakhiba”. Rakhine migrants return home as Rakhine soldiers, not migrants. Many observers are surprised to see how fast the AA resistance has grown; apparently the AA has come largely to control many parts of Rakhine state. Rakhine migrants play a critical role in this regard. Migrants who left in search of work in foreign countries, as well as within Myanmar, have returned to pursue the AA’s dream. This dream is far more important to them than any personal dreams that they may have pursued before.
MIGRATION IN POWER POLITICS

Myanmar migration is not necessarily just migration in search of improved welfare. It is also highly associated with power politics in some cases. The election period was such a case. Migration in this respect includes not only labour migrants but also members of the armed forces. For instance, in the 2020 election, U Soe Thein, a former minister in the president’s office, competed as a candidate of the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in the very small Kayah State constituency of Bawlakhe. Just over 8,000 voters reside there. Several reports indicated that strong military support undeniably contributed to the USDP’s continued electoral success in Bawlakhe, as “the three Tatmadaw battalions and Border Guard Forces account for about 980 of the more than 8,000 voters”, according to one report. Members of the armed forces can move around— that is, migrate—during the electoral process for security purposes, and at the same time shape election results in small constituencies in particular. Migrant workers have shaped election results, too. For instance, in Kachin State, the Kachin State People’s Party (KSPP) blamed the votes of mainly Bamar migrant workers for its poor results despite having secured huge support from Kachin voters in areas like Hpakant and Tani Townships. Gold and jade mining projects attract many migrants to those townships, and they can be initiated anytime and anywhere during the pre-election period as a way to shape the election results.

Apparently, the SAC will add 42 more districts to the country’s current 74; a total of 116 districts will be in place if the plan is actually implemented. While a major reason behind this move is to provide for ‘effective administrative functions’, as claimed by the SAC, it is also understood that the move is related to the next election—promised for 2023, when the SAC also aims to implement a proportional representation (PR) system. PR has pros and cons, as do other electoral systems. Many believe that the goal of its implementation is to secure military power in politics through the 25 per cent seats that the military is constitutionally granted and the seats that pro-military parties will win thanks to PR. In fact, if PR is in place, migration may play an even more decisive role in Myanmar’s elections. The reason is that there will be many smaller districts (or constituencies), and thus fewer eligible local voters than before, as a result of which migrant workers or members of the armed forces would gain more electoral power vis-à-vis those local voters.

The role of migration in Myanmar’s power politics concerns not just the movement of people but also that of a statue: the country’s national hero Bogyoke (General) Aung San. Politicians have erected this statue in, or rather migrated it to, several public spaces under the pretext of affirming his federalism principle, popularly known as the Panglong Agreement. This migration sparked protests across many ethnic areas in particular. The ethnic communities argue that the statues are symbols not of heroism but rather of policies that diminish the rights of the ethnic minorities in the country. Whether the installation of or debate over this statue actually affects elections results remains unknown. Given the political circumstances of migration, however, migration trends following the coup will certainly have a political impact that should not be overlooked. Concerned stakeholders need to pay more attention to migration in their political decision making.
Important data on migration trends since the coup are not yet available. These data would record the number of people who have migrated internally and externally since February of last year. But the number is certainly growing, given how many are suffering airstrikes and other attacks by the military. One aid agency has predicted that there would be more than 14 million people—or more than 27 per cent of Myanmar’s total population—in dire humanitarian need in 2022, compared to around 1 million during the pre-coup period. Similarly, the number of people forced into displacement will have doubled, to more than 400,000 people, since the coup.24 The affected population of over 14 million represents 38 per cent of the total eligible voters—who totalled more than 37 million people—in the Myanmar elections of 2020.25 How long the ongoing civil war will last remains unknown, and the same is true for the significant movement of people within the country and to external destinations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State/Region</th>
<th>Population, 2014 Census</th>
<th>Displacement Since the coup</th>
<th>Note</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kachin</td>
<td>1,689,441</td>
<td>10,600</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayah</td>
<td>286,627</td>
<td>93,800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayin</td>
<td>1,574,079</td>
<td>68,900</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chin</td>
<td>478,801</td>
<td>33,200</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sagaing</td>
<td>5,325,347</td>
<td>171,100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ta’nintharyi</td>
<td>1,408,401</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bago</td>
<td>4,867,373</td>
<td>800</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magway</td>
<td>3,917,055</td>
<td>42,300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandalay</td>
<td>6,165,723</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>2,054,393</td>
<td>7,500</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rakhine</td>
<td>3,188,807</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>687,000 in Cox's Bazar and 237,000 already in the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yangon</td>
<td>7,360,703</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shan</td>
<td>5,824,432</td>
<td>70,900</td>
<td>Data in eastern Shan State still being collected.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ayeyarwaddy</td>
<td>6,184,829</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Naypyitaww</td>
<td>1,160,242</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In a reality, the displacement could be far more exceeding than those numbers collected; there is very limited access on the ground. Source: displacement figures come from Myanmar Emergency Update.
These trends have several political implications. The most serious one concerns ethnic identity. A good example was observed in the processing of the 2014 Myanmar census data. The release of data on the sensitive matter of religion occurred in July 2016, after a two-year delay. The data on ethnicity have, however, not been published yet. A reason for the delay in releasing, or the failure to release, those apparently even more sensitive data is that they ‘could shatter transition stability’.

In the case of data on ethnicity, direct political entitlements are involved. Those data could inflame political tensions in the context of the longstanding demands of the country’s various ethnic minority groups for greater autonomy and participation in political decision making. Constitutionally, these ideas are still controversial. For instance, Provision 161/c of Myanmar’s 2008 Constitution created a governing system under which ethnic groups—Bamar and non-Bamar alike—that meet a designated population threshold of 0.1 per cent of the nation’s population in a state or region will have the chance to elect their own representatives at the level of state and regional legislatures. In each state or region, the individual elected then becomes a National Race Affairs Minister (NRAM) for that state or region. There are 29 NRAMs in total across many areas. This system itself could create a political problem. For instance, the constitutional provision involved could also be understood as leading to the ‘deepening of (political) competition’ among ethnic groups. In this regard, one commenter notes, “I wish they had never included article 161/c. It was put there as a trap that has been set for [non-Bamar] ethnic people to make us fight with each other and distract us from focusing on real issues.”

In addition, migration could trigger conflict when it comes to resource sharing. In some cases, such situations have already arrived. For instance, communities have raised concerns over labour-intensive industries such as jade and gold mining in Kachin State and in the Naga Self-Administered Zone of Sagaing Region.

**MIGRATION IN THE CURRENT EFFORT TO BUILD A FEDERAL DEMOCRACY**

The coup leadership has claimed that the ‘establishment of a union based on democracy and federalism’ is the key to a success for the nation. The democratic forces have also pronounced that the country’s achievement of long-lasting peace and democracy is all about building a federal democratic state. To this end, the Federal Democracy Charter offers core guidance from the current democratic forces. In fact, migration will be of considerable significance in the construction of a federal democratic state. Both external and internal migration will largely shape many important elements of the political setting: voting power, the voting process, ethnicity, ethnic representation, citizenship, the status of minorities, local governance, and so forth.}

In fact, migration, including migration prompted by the coup, could have positive impacts on the process of building a federal democracy in which many diverse ethnic groups, including the country’s majority Bamar population, reside in ‘other’ parts of the country,
including ‘ethnic’ areas. Members of the Bamar majority themselves have now suffered the atrocities committed by the regime especially in heartland areas such as Sagaing and Magway Regions. Such people now understand how ethnic rights have been violated. They feel sympathy for the ethnic minorities. However, this is just an individual or a community level impact, not one occurring at the institutional level. The nation requires a political pact on how to turn those ‘shared feelings’ into a political compromise ensuring a better coexistence. This action is not only related to constitutional designs but also to changes in the mindset and behaviour of ethnic groups, whether majority or minority. There is now an opportunity for such change. Without it, the same old stories of the majority fighting the minorities will ensue.

CONCLUSION

The importance of ongoing migration in Myanmar must not be underestimated. The current migration landscape has a profound impact on the country now and for the future, and in a wide range of areas including constitutional design, ethnicity, political representation, citizenship, voting power, resource sharing, power sharing and beyond.

Myanmar’s present migration trend will shape many important socioeconomic elements of the country’s future. Migration will also be a decisive factor in shaping the future political landscape—whether it works to reinforce Myanmar’s federal democratic future or triggers further conflict among many diverse ethnicities. For this reason, migration needs to be considered politically, and not just in conventional ways. Ongoing migration is also a driver of attempts to topple the junta, as it relates to factors like financial support for those attempts. The junta is not able to block support for pro-democracy forces coming from migrants outside the country. Given the significant numbers of migrants abroad and in many liberated areas, Myanmar’s migrants—internal and external—now have the leverage to shape the nation’s future.

ENDNOTES

1 There is very little likelihood of the political stakeholders agreeing to move forward in a peaceful manner that could bring about some return to stability in the country. Currently, the ongoing warfare between the coup regime and anti-coup forces—People’s Defense Forces, the National Unity Government, and some ethnic armed organizations—appears to see them determined to ‘annihilate’ each other. This unfolding crisis also creates many economic migrants since the domestic economy has suffered considerably as a result.


4 Since the country’s independence in 1948, Myanmar has faced repeated political crises—notably the 1962 military coup, the 1988 Uprising and, most recently, the coup of 2021—all in the context of a civil war that has lasted more than seven decades.

5 Author’s interviews with migrants from Ayayerwaddy Region and from the heartlands of Upper Myanmar, 11-20 March 2022.

6 Mon News Agency, “KNU Brigade (5) Announced All Staff Serving the Military to Leave Hpapun Township”, 2 February 2022 (https://monnews.org/2022/02/02/knu-brigade-5-announced-all-staff-serving-the-military-to-leave-hpapun-township/).


10 The public inside Myanmar is having a hard time making donations to the popular resistance since it is believed that the junta controls the banks through its surveillance of who makes transfers to whom; many customers have found their accounts frozen following their donations to the Civil Disobedience Movement, for example.


12 For details on the Arakan Dream or the Way of Rakhita, see Kyaw Linn, “‘Way of Rakhita’: dream or nightmare?”, Asia Times, 28 February 2019 (https://asiatimes.com/2019/02/way-of-rakhita-dream-or-nightmare/).


17 Districts are important components of the administrative system in Myanmar, comprising 4.5 townships on average per district. In Myanmar, there are currently 330 townships in 74 districts in total.


21 As of writing, whether Proportional Representation (PR), First Past the Post (FPTP) or Hybrid remains unclear; regardless of this, migrant issues will likely shape the elections in many ways.


29 Article 161/c of the 2008 Constitution states, “Representatives of the State Hluttaw, each is elected from each national race determined by the authorities concerned as having a population which constitutes 0.1 percent and above of the population of the Union, of the remaining national races other than those who have already obtained a respective State or a Self-Administered Area in that State”.


31 Ibid., p. 40.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.


35 The Federal Democracy Charter is the most recent effort at alternative constitution-making in Myanmar; it offers the outlines of a kind of political compromise in the making of a federal democratic future, under the leadership of the National Unity Consultative Council—a body whose membership includes the NUG, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw and some representatives of ethnic armed organizations.
