



Education Cannot Wait

Education is a fundamental human right. The situation in Myanmar is a poignant example of how education, a fundamental human right affirmed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, can be deeply entangled with political and social upheavals. Every human being has the right to quality education and life-long learning opportunities. For a country that endured over a century of colonization and authoritarian rule, education has historically been a tool of power, accessible primarily to the privileged and often used as a means of control.

The military coup on February 1, 2021, led by the military commander-in-chief, Min Aung Hlaing, marked a significant turning point in the politicization of education in Myanmar. The regime’s attempt to impose its control over educational institutions was met with widespread resistance from students, teachers, and parents, who refused to participate in the military-led education system. This collective resistance became known as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a powerful force of opposition against the military junta where civil servants from different ministries refuse to work under the military rule.

Despite the harsh repression faced by these educators and students, their determination to

resist reflects the broader struggle for justice and democracy in Myanmar. However, for the people of Myanmar, boycotting the military regime does not mean putting everything on hold because education simply cannot wait. Delaying education, especially for young children, will only affect their growth as well as the country’s future. The dilemma of resisting a repressive regime while ensuring continued access to education has forced many in Myanmar to find alternative means of learning.

More than three years after the military coup, Myanmar is facing its grimmest days with widespread instability, the economic collapse, and a growing humanitarian crisis. In this special story, *Mohinga Matters* attempts to understand the current education situation in Myanmar, its past struggles and future prospects, including how education is being accessed amidst ongoing revolution against the military regime. This ongoing crisis highlights the resilience and resourcefulness of the people of Myanmar, who continue to prioritize education despite immense challenges. It also underscores the need for international support and attention, as the future of an entire generation—and the country’s long-term prospects—hinges on their ability to access quality education during these tumultuous times.

Education: A Quick Snapshot

Investing in quality education is widely recognized as crucial for a country’s future success, as it builds human resources, supports economic growth, and fosters long-term development. This is likely why successive military governments since 1962 have allowed Myanmar’s education system to suffer from severe neglect and underinvestment. Characterized by rote learning, outdated curricula, poor teaching methods, high student-teacher ratios, and inadequate resources, the system was chronically underfunded. Education’s purpose was distorted to indoctrinate citizens and promote the military’s nationalist ideology, rather than being upheld as a basic human right.¹ Furthermore, amidst political instability, military oppression, and civil conflicts, Myanmar’s education system has lagged behind other countries in the region for decades.

A glimmer of hope emerged when democratic reforms briefly opened the door from 2011 to 2021. During the civilian government’s rule, discussions about major education reforms took place. These reforms were introduced under the former military general Thein Sein’s administration and continued during the National League of Democracy (NLD)’s tenure before the coup. Thein Sein’s government launched the Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) in 2012 to address the challenges and opportunities in transforming the education sector. The NLD government introduced the National Education Strategic Plan (2016-2021) to enhance teaching and learning, vocational education, research and innovation, and to make education more accessible and inclusive. The NLD’s reforms were part of a broader strategy to modernize Myanmar’s education system and better prepare its youth for the demands of a globalized world. With the hope and trust that many Myanmar citizens had in long-time opposition leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, parents were optimistic about a brighter future for their children, starting with an improved education system.

For many Myanmar citizens, these reforms brought hope. Ko Thurein was one of those hopeful parents. His daughter was about to start kindergarten in 2021, and both he and his wife wanted her to attend No. 1 Basic Education High School in Dagon Township, one of Myanmar’s most prestigious public schools, which Daw Aung San Suu Kyi herself had at-

tended. He went the extra mile to secure a place for his daughter, even renting an apartment in Dagon Township to meet residency requirements. He took pride in sending his daughter to a public school.

“I believe a good public school system is something to be proud of... and that’s why I wanted to send my daughter to that school,” he said. As a politically aware individual, Ko Thurein noticed positive changes in the education system during the brief decade of reform. “In the past two consecutive civilian governments, we saw significant improvements. Enrollment fees and uniforms were free. Teaching methods shifted away from rote learning. We were hopeful.” Despite having the option to choose private education for his daughter, his optimism led him to the government school where reforms were underway.

Students like Hein, who experienced the reformed education system firsthand, also shared this optimism. Hein, a 15-year-old student from Yangon who attended a government school with new curricula before the coup, also felt optimistic about the reform initiatives. “Before the coup, the education system had made significant progress, and we were almost on par with other countries,” he said.

However, the military coup in February 2021 abruptly halted these positive developments, plunging the country back into turmoil and reversing many of the gains made in the education sector. The hope and optimism that had begun to take root were once again overshadowed by political instability, leaving the future of Myanmar’s education—and its students—in a precarious state.

“Viewing schools and universities as potential centers for dissent, previous military regimes relocated higher education institutions to remote areas. Curricula were simplified, critical thinking was excluded, and memorization of textbooks became the primary mode of learning.² This approach seemed designed to ensure that students remained uncritical and less likely to challenge military rule.”

Inequality Persisted Despite Reform Initiatives



Despite the reform initiatives introduced by Myanmar's civilian governments which were appreciated by individuals like Ko Thurein and Hein, systemic inequalities and entrenched issues persisted in the education system, limiting the reach and effectiveness of these changes. The National Education Bill, passed into law in 2014 under the civilian government NLD, faced significant criticism due to its centralized nature. The new law failed to address the needs of the education for ethnic minorities and marginalized groups and introduced anti-unionization measures, affecting teachers and students. The National Education Bill, passed in 2014, became a focal point of controversy. Its centralized nature disappointed many who had hoped for greater autonomy for educational institutions, especially universities. Student activists and unions started their protests calling for greater autonomy for universities. These protests were met with a police crackdown, and the reforms proceeded without addressing the core concerns of the dissenters. The reforms, though well-intentioned, did not adequately address the deep-rooted inequalities in the education system.

As experts and activists noted, marginalized communities and rural areas continued to experience inequality in infrastructure and resources despite some changes in the system. While there were updates to the curriculum and increased spending, systemic inequalities and institutional inertia persisted, limiting access to quality education for socioeconomically disadvantaged groups.³ Overcoming these entrenched issues and transforming Myanmar's education system into one that is equitable and high-quality for all remained a significant challenge. This disparity was evident in the experiences of students like Seng, a 20-year-old student from Kachin State, who received basic education in two different government schools in Lwegel, a small town near the China-Myanmar border, and Bhamo, a town along the Ayeyarwaddy river. She noticed a stark

contrast in the quality of education and teacher competency between smaller towns like Lwegel and a more developed town like Bhamo.

Seng recalled, "It was noticeable that educators in big cities, universities, and schools are much more highly qualified compared to teachers in other regions and schools in remote areas. Even between Lwegel and Bhamo, the quality of teachers varies. In remote locations, there are fewer teachers with extensive knowledge. Rural areas often have teachers trained at Teachers Training Institutes, while larger cities have teachers who complete their training at Education Universities/Colleges."

Dr. K Roi, who is a retired Philosophy Professor at the University of Myitkyina and now a volunteer professor in Mai Ja Yang shared a more general suggestion on the quality of teachers in the country. "For the teachers who are in service of the education sector, it would be better if the respective government could provide them with effective training courses which let the students do more self-study so that they can think critically about what is wrong and right, rather than spoon feeding them or forcing them to listen to the teacher or using the authority of being a teacher." This gap in teacher quality and the lack of professional development opportunities for educators in remote areas further perpetuated the educational inequalities.

These systemic issues persisted amidst the education reform, and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 presented additional challenges. The digital divide, urban-rural divide, low internet penetration in rural areas, and income inequalities further exacerbated educational inaccessibility. The NLD's Ministry of Education attempted to address these challenges through various initiatives, including educational broadcasts on television and radio and the promotion of online learning platforms via social media. However, the effectiveness of these initiatives was still hindered by existing disparities in access to education based

on geographic location, socioeconomic status, and ethnic background. Many schools, particularly in remote and conflict-affected areas, had been struggling with inadequate infrastructure and resources even before the pandemic. The shift to remote learning highlighted the urgent need for improved infrastructure and greater investment in educational technology.

Just before the military coup in 2021, the education system, which had suffered from chron-

ic mismanagement by successive military regimes, had seen some reform efforts but was further complicated by the global pandemic. Against this backdrop, the coup leader staged the coup, which faced resistance from various administrative mechanisms, including the education system. The coup not only disrupted the education sector but also intensified the challenges faced by millions of children who were already struggling to access their basic right to education.



Disobedience in Action

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) that emerged in Myanmar following the February 2021 coup was a powerful, collective response to the military's seizure of power. The coup, led by Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing, initially left the country in shock and uncertainty. However, within days, a broad coalition of civil servants from various professions—including doctors, nurses, teachers, railroad workers, and bank employees—began to refuse to perform their duties. This act of defiance aimed to paralyze government operations and delegitimize the military regime. University and high school students like Hein, who were aware of the political situation, also refused to attend the public schools under the military rule. Parents of younger children, such as Ko Thurein, joined the CDM by keeping their children out of public schools in solidarity with striking educators.

The collective boycott reflected a widespread refusal to legitimize the military's control over the education system and the country at large. The movement saw the convergence of various generations and professions, uniting in a common cause against military rule. Young student activists

like Ko Nan Lin, Ko Min Han Htet, Ma Ei Thinzar Maung and Ko Wai Moe Naing led peaceful protests, while older and more experienced former student leaders such as U Min Ko Naing emerged at various protest sites to support the people's peaceful resistance. The unity of different generations, communities, and professions created a powerful and visible movement, demonstrating to the world that the Myanmar people opposed another military rule.

Non-violent protests were soon met with violent crackdowns by the military regime, affecting both boycotting teachers and students (a.k.a CDM teachers and students). Although the exact number of CDM teachers in the early days was difficult to verify, local news outlet Myanmar Now estimated that more than half of the country's 400,000 teachers joined the CDM in 2021. A World Bank report indicated that nearly 30 percent of educators were on strike.⁴ Over 125,000 teachers were suspended from their positions for defying the military regime,⁵ and as of 2023, it has been reported that more than 130,000 teachers continue to boycott the military regime.⁶

How Myanmar Students Shaped Political Change: A Historical Journey



Throughout much of Myanmar's modern history, student activism has played a crucial role not only in attempting education reform against colonial and authoritarian state's control but also demanding freedom, social justice and democratic reform. Students have repeatedly challenged the authority for freedom, equality, and justice from the colonial era to successive military rules. However, since the military's takeover of the country in 1962, education has been politicized by successive military regimes to suppress student activism.

Traditional Education

Before modern education, education appeared in religious settings, mostly emphasizing Burmese-Buddhist culture. In pre-colonial Burma, up until the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the monasteries known as 'kyaungs' served as the principal means of education,⁷ and Pongyi (Buddhist monks) played a central role in providing education to the laymen.

Colonial Education

Myanmar's education system began to take shape under British colonial rule in the 19th and 20th centuries. The British established a centralized education system that introduced Western-style schooling, including English language instruction and a curriculum based on British models. During British colonial rule, three types of schools were prevalent: Vernacular schools, Anglo-vernacular schools, and English language schools. Meanwhile, the monastic education system, perceived as traditional and backward by the colonizers, declined.⁸

Independence

After gaining independence from British rule in 1948, Myanmar has seen a continuation of student activism that has been a driving force for political change. Students have been at the forefront of major anti-government demonstrations, protesting not just for educational reform but for broader societal and political transformation.

U Thant

Another critical resistance where students played a key role was the U Thant funeral crisis over a decade later in 1974.

Saffron Revolution

Nearly two decades later, despite the severe punishment that came with political activism, the Saffron Revolution in 2007 saw students and monks unite against the regime.

1824

Colonial Rule

1920 & 1936

1948

1962

1974

1988

2007

2015 & 2021

Modern Education

Modern education came to Myanmar with the establishment of British colonization and the arrival of missionaries after the three Anglo-Burmese Wars (1824-1826) (1852-1853) (1885). Christian missionary schools were established as early as in 1824 introducing modern education.



Pongyis played a crucial role in teaching literacy, religious scriptures, and traditional subjects, particularly to young boys while there were other schools in parallel to educate girls.⁹ This earlier form of religious education system was disturbed by the arrival of British colonization.

University Boycott

Rangoon College students initiated the first major strike in 1920 in response to the British government's proposed University of Rangoon Act, 1920, known as "University boycott".

Again in 1936, students protested against the University Act, which they perceived as limiting their freedom and autonomy. The works of student activists were also important in helping Burmese society develop anti-colonial consciousness through their literature, activism, social and political activities.

7 July Uprising

The activist spirit was evident in the 1962 Rangoon University Student Protests against the military coup, known as the 7 July Student Uprising. Students demanded academic freedom, political freedom and an end to military rule which was met by violent crackdown by Ne Win's government. The symbol of students' resistance, the Students' Union Building, was also dynamited.



8888

Their impact peaked in 1988 when they led a nationwide pro-democracy uprising against the repressive military junta. All of the uprisings met violent crackdowns but they laid the groundwork for major pro-democracy uprisings where students have played a crucial role. After the 8888 uprisings, the military government took extreme measures to prevent students from carrying out mass protests through relocation of the universities and shutdown.

Continued Fight

More recently, the 2015 Student Strike opposed restrictions in the National Education Law, while the 2021 Anti-Military Coup Protests saw a new generation take to the streets denouncing the military's seizure of power.



Politicizing Education

In May 2021, more than three months after the coup, junta chief Min Aung Hlaing was eager to demonstrate the justification for the coup and to assert his legitimacy and control over the country. He saw reopening schools as a way to achieve this. However, for the public, the collective trauma and public wounds of young protesters being killed by the military were still fresh, and the spirit of resistance remained strong.

By June 2021, only 10 percent of the approximately nine million students were enrolled in public schools. At this time, the rollout of COVID-19 vaccines, scheduled for January 2021, was also disrupted due to healthcare workers being on strike and a loss of public trust in the military-administered vaccine distribution. Reopening schools without ensuring widespread vaccination posed a risk of spreading COVID-19, yet the junta chief pressed forward with the school openings. As expected, early July and August 2021 saw the country devastated by a severe third wave of COVID-19. The significant defiance against the military coup and the regime's mismanagement resulted in schools being unable to open during the 2021 academic year. The World Bank reported that public schools in Myanmar were closed for 532 days between February 2020 and February 2022, making Myanmar the country with the longest school closures in the East Asia and Pacific region due to both the global pandemic and the military coup.¹⁰

Experts and researchers have repeatedly warned that this education gap could lead to a generational loss in human capital. Ko Nan Lin, a stu-



dent union leader and a long-time advocate for the national education reform who continues to lead flash mob protests, emphasizes that the regime's forced reopening of schools during a pandemic exacerbates the education crisis. He argues that the regime's actions are not just a failure to address immediate educational needs but are also detrimental to the long-term development of the nation.

Ko Nan Lin emphasizes that, "The coup's impact on sectors like education and healthcare services is profound and long-lasting." He continues, "The regime's mishandling of education amidst the pandemic has significant repercussions for the country's future, with long-term consequences for development and reconstruction."

Ko Thurein's hopes of sending his young daughter to a government school were dashed after the coup. He abandoned the apartment he had rented and his plans to enroll his daughter in his dream school, believing that military interference would yield no benefits. Hein, similarly devastated by the coup, chose to boycott the military's education system and is now seeking alternative ways to continue his education.

One reason Ko Thurein decided against sending his daughter to school was his own bitter experience with military-controlled education.

He recalled, "We were never taught to think critically. We were simply told to memorize textbooks. I felt inferior most of the time because of the preferential treatment by teachers. I had terrible experiences, and school became a place I despised. If the military takes control of the education system again, this generation will experience the same thing."

Ko Thurein's concerns were not unfounded. Successive military regimes have exerted complete control over education, as well as other aspects of society. Among Asian military regimes, the military government was notably notorious for its complete dominance over state social mobility.¹¹ Viewing schools and universities as potential centers for dissent, previous military regimes relocated higher education institutions to

Distrust in the System

remote areas. Curricula were simplified, critical thinking was excluded, and memorization of textbooks became the primary mode of learning.¹² This approach seemed designed to ensure that students remained uncritical and less likely to challenge military rule.

Given that several generations have been educated under this highly controlled and repressive system, it is unsurprising that young student protesters have hung banners reading, "Reject the military's slave education" at school entrances. The banners signify a rejection of the very system that has long been used to stifle dissent and enforce conformity. This resistance highlights the ongoing struggle against a system that many view as an instrument of oppression rather than a means of genuine education and personal growth. This situation reflects the broader challenges faced by Myanmar's educational sector under military rule and the deep desire for a system that truly supports the development of critical thinking and individual freedom.



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Weekly Update

At Mohinga Matters, we write weekly to document the coup, to share our experience, and to contemplate. Our freedom memoirs can be read here:

<https://mohingamatters.com/weekly-updates/>

An Alternative to the Regime's Education

In the early days of the coup, the public was determined to reject Min Aung Hlaing's power grab in any way they could. People urged civil servants to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and educators at various levels refused to go to school, while parents chose not to send their children to public schools. Some youth activists chanted, "Don't go to school if you want to change," in a bid to reject the military's "slave education." This sparked serious debates and concerns, especially given that the education gap had already been widened by COVID-19 the previous year.

Ko Nan Lin, a student activist who has been vocal about students' rights for the past decade, said, "University students, being over 16, can make their own decisions. However, many basic education students, already affected by COVID-19, face practical difficulties if told not to attend school." The decision to boycott government schools created a significant gap in educational opportunities, exacerbating existing disparities.



This is not the first time that Myanmar has seen a boycott of the education establishment. During British colonial rule, when the government attempted to centralize education with the University of Rangoon Act of 1920, student activists went on strike, known as the "University Boycott." This was the first systematic protest with nationalist elements emerging from students. To address the education gap left by the boycott, nationalist schools were established where Myanmar national teachers provided education for the children of ordinary people. This experience is similar to the educational challenges faced by the students in the aftermath of the 2021 coup. In response to the urgent need for education amid political instability, Myanmar sought ways to continue educating its youth by establishing parallel alternative systems. On April 16, 2021, when the ousted parliamentarians formed a parallel government known as the National Unity Government (NUG), the Ministry of Education was included in its order of precedence, demonstrating the government's commitment to education for children and youth.

While the NUG focused on consolidating its power during its initial months, community leaders, elders, and private individuals stepped in to organize classes for children, also creating jobs and purpose for striking civil servants. NUG's Deputy Minister of Education Ja Htoi Pan expressed gratitude for these efforts in an exclusive interview with *Mohinga Matters*. The minister said, "The interim education system wasn't something that our revolutionary government (NUG) established. We supported it and created a strategy for its implementation. In reality, it's the communities on the ground that have been executing it."

Initially, some schools operated online using internet and video conferencing platforms. Private schools also hired CDM teachers for their interim or alternative education initiatives. Some of these schools were affiliated with the NUG to formally recognize their programs and accreditations. However, the military's response was severe, particularly towards new educational enterprises associated with the NUG or CDM staff. Notably, in 2022, the military regime cracked down on Kaung For You online school.¹³ A list of CDM teachers, students, and parents associated with the school was leaked, and the military threatened action against them. The leading figures of the school, identified as a CDM township education officer and two CDM teachers, were detained and charged under the infamous incitement law, Penal Code 505-a. The mil-

itary accused these individuals of implementing "illegal online education programs" and affiliating with "the NUG terrorist group."

In its attempt to regain control over the country, the military regime has harshly repressed any group or individual opposing its rule or connected to the NUG, an opposition group that has garnered significant popular support. Ko Nan Lin

noted, "During the British colonial rule, national schools were established as alternatives while government schools were boycotted. The British did not close these schools or arrest their teachers. Today, many alternatives to SAC (State Administration Council established by the coup regime) education have been created and implemented, but the SAC has harshly suppressed these efforts."

Revolutionizing Education Amidst Post-Coup Violence

Three years after the coup, as armed resistance against Min Aung Hlaing's regime has intensified across the country, interim education programs have also gained momentum despite the regime's harsh crackdown. Diverse education providers have been operating in liberated areas and regions without a military presence, including some rural areas. Depending on the security situation, basic education schools have been opened for children, and higher education programs have been initiated and coordinated among different providers. At the same time, online schools and programs are running in parallel to address the education gap caused by COVID-19 and the coup.

According to data provided by the NUG, more than 700,000 students are enrolled in nearly 6,000 schools on the ground. Over 60,000 CDM teachers are working in these interim education programs. The NUG's Ministry of Education has been supporting schools in 89 of the country's 330 townships, including 13 under Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs). Additionally, 76 online schools are in operation, with over 2,000 teachers providing instruction online. The parallel government's education ministry delivers these programs through brick-and-mortar schools in safe regions and online in others, using a blended learning approach.

When the NUG minister referred to "online" and "blended learning," she did not mean Zoom meetings and Google Classrooms. Ja Htoi Pan elaborated, "We distribute educational materials in offline formats such as USB drives and files to areas without internet access. These materials include over 3,000 video content pieces in Burmese for various educational purposes. We have created channels on Telegram and playlists on YouTube to facilitate self-study and provide a safe, home-based learning environment. Handbooks and other

resources have also been published to support this initiative."

Although the Ministry of Education's administrative staff operates from exile or liberated areas, this does not excuse the parallel government from addressing the educational needs of its people. College-bound students also require special arrangements to pursue higher education without delaying their growth and life plans. For this group, the NUG organized the first basic education completion examination, with over 75,000 students participating. With more than 50,000 students passing the exam, the question of continuing higher education arises. In the 2023-2024 academic year, 16 universities authorized by the NUG have opened their doors to first-year students.¹⁴ The NUG's minister also noted that the higher education sector has been accelerated with contributions from various stakeholders, including local communities, autonomous institutions, and university councils.

Three years after the coup, Myanmar's educational landscape has been profoundly shaped by ongoing conflict and resistance. Despite the harsh crackdown by Min Aung Hlaing's regime, interim education programs have emerged as a vital alternative, driven by the need to provide continuity and quality in education amidst instability.

The Regime's Indiscriminate Assaults Affecting Education Programs

As Myanmar's armed revolution against the military coup extends into its third year in 2024, the military regime has intensified its efforts to suppress the persistent spirit of resistance throughout the country. This increased oppression has led to expanded disruption and instability. Although various stakeholders strive to provide education for the youth, maintaining uninterrupted academic programs is nearly impossible when the military launches attacks on liberated areas.

Karenni (Kayah) State, notable for its strong resistance movement, has suffered significant targeting and airstrikes by the regime. The resistance forces in Karenni State have successfully established liberated areas and formed their own administrative and police structures. Under the leadership of the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC) and the Karenni State Interim Executive Council (IEC), both basic and higher education centers have been set up across the region. However, these education programs frequently face disruption due to the military's indiscriminate aerial attacks on civilian areas, including schools.

A report by Myanmar Pressphoto Agency indicated that schools were unable to operate throughout the day due to the constant threat of airstrikes.¹⁵ A teacher noted that schools could not open in June, the beginning of the academic year, and some started late due to ongoing conflicts between resistance groups and the military regime.

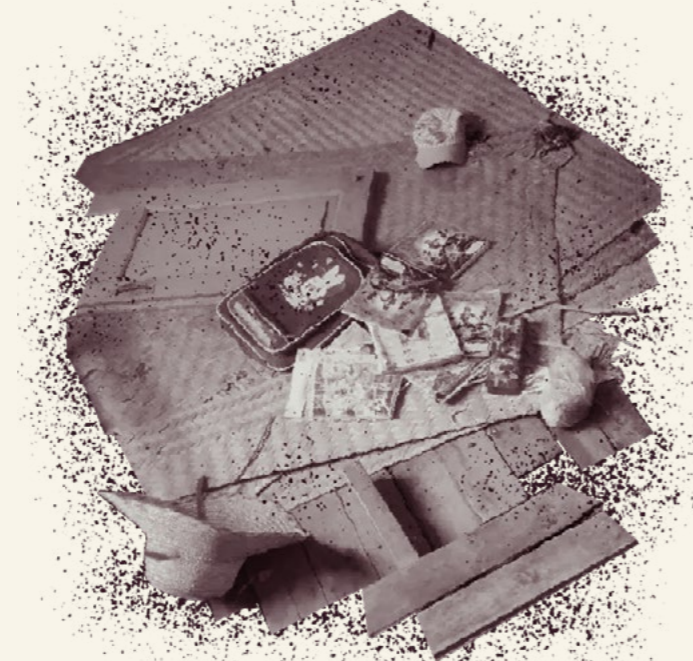
As recently as February 2024, a military airstrike in Karenni State resulted in the deaths of four children and injuries to ten others, as the attack occurred during a class session. This is not an isolated incident; the military has repeatedly used indiscriminate aerial attacks that target children and civilians.

Seng, a Kachin student now pursuing a college degree at Mai Ja Yang College, described

similar instability that threatens the physical safety and mental well-being of students. She shared, "In the three years I have studied at Mai Ja Yang, each time we approached exam periods, we experienced shelling attacks [by the Myanmar military] or drones and airplanes flying overhead. These disturbances significantly impacted us both mentally and physically, severely disrupting our studies." The military's brutal attacks do not discriminate between dissidents, civilians, or children. As of mid-June 2024, the NUG reported that more than 800 children have died due to the regime's assaults.

Regarding measures to protect schoolchildren from these attacks, Deputy Minister Ja Htoi Pan explained the inter-ministerial efforts involving the Ministry of Health (MOH), the Ministry of Home Affairs and Immigration (MOHAI), and the Ministry of Education (MOE). "MOHAI is responsible for digging bomb shelters and managing related processes, including budgeting. These shelters are established based on the local security situation. Our ministry provides educational pamphlets on safety measures, while the Ministry of Health arranges emergency kits for schools." Local administrative authorities carry out the actual implementation of these safety measures, while the ministries ensure that they are routinely monitored and checked.

The emergence of alternative educational systems during this period underscores the resilience and creativity of Myanmar's people in the face of authoritarian control. The continued suppression of these efforts by the military regime further illustrates the challenges and risks involved in resisting oppressive rule while striving to provide education for future generations.



Constant Disruption Demands a More Flexible Approach to Education

As the physical instability of the country interrupts regular academic programming, maintaining sustainable formal education programs becomes increasingly challenging. Informal education programs with flexible approaches can serve as an alternative, emphasizing that education should not be confined to traditional academic subjects.

Ko Nan Lin, a long-time advocate for education reform, questioned whether it is time to consider alternative modes of learning. "Our society has long been tied to the formal education system, where parents believe their duty is fulfilled when graduation photos hang in the living room. We have often thought that life is only meaningful if we attend university and get a degree. However, the past three years have shown us that education isn't limited to formal graduation." He emphasized that the boycott against the military regime's education should not negate the learning and work opportunities available to young people.

Khin Sandar Nyunt, a researcher-turned-principal of Spring Guru Children's Education Center in Karenni State (now the name changed into Karenni College of Social Sciences and Humanities), highlighted the growing demand for non-formal education programs and vocational training in her area. There are about eight schools in Karenni State that offer short vocational courses, typically ranging from three to five months. Spring Guru is one of these institutions providing such programs. She said, "In our school, we designed a short course program, which is a youth education program for hard skills, soft skills, and knowledge

needed during the revolution, and provided a three-month training. Late career subjects were also added, and a three-month-long vocational training was also run."

Khin Sandar Nyunt also pointed out the disruption of continued education beyond basic schooling. With the boycott of the military's education, including the matriculation examination for high school students, some students face difficulties progressing to college and university levels. At Spring Guru, entrance exams have been established, and high school students who pass these exams are admitted to its diploma programs. She added, "It takes a while for all students to pass the matriculation exam during this crisis, and there are lots of students who couldn't finish high school education and join the NUG online classes."

Due to internet shutdowns and unstable connections, students have to rely on in-person classes opened in Karenni State rather than online education provided by the NUG. Khin Sandar Nyunt shared that off-duty resistance soldiers have joined some of the diploma classes, emphasizing the importance of keeping special places in her classrooms for resistance fighters who are unable to join the frontline due to injuries. This raises concerns about the future of youth who sacrifice their prospects to fight the military regime.

Other education providers, such as Spring University Myanmar and Virtual Federal University, have emerged since the coup, offering diploma courses and academic subjects. Existing institutions like Parami University and Federal

Law Academy in Mai Ja Yang have also expanded their programs to meet the demand from students in other areas. Dr. K Roi and her colleagues in Mai Ja Yang are providing students with the required education to study further. “We can only provide them with knowledge. If they are planning to study abroad, they have to take the US General Education Development (GED). Here, they can just build their solid foundation, and it is easy and smooth for them when they take the GED test.”

On the other hand, there have been migrant schools operating for decades to address the need to provide the right to education to children of refugees and immigrants. One example is Minmahaw, a migrant education center and higher education program based in Mae Sot at the Thai-Myanmar border, which faces higher demand after the coup. Founded in 2007 to address the educational needs of refugee and migrant children from Myanmar, Minmahaw provides education that aligns with international standards, aiming to uplift displaced

Myanmar people and offer opportunities to disadvantaged youth. The Minmahaw Higher Education Program (MHEP) offers a one-year intensive study and boarding program designed to prepare students for the GED exam, which has gained popularity since the coup.

Ko Ye, the head of Minmahaw School, noted that the boycott against the military’s education system has limited higher education opportunities even for students from urban areas. This growing demand for GED programs has also posed challenges for migrant education centers. He said, “Migrant schools are built and designed to accommodate children from migrant families. It is not prepared for the post-coup situation, so many migrant schools can’t accept a large number of students, there is a limited number of teachers as well as limited fundings.” In addition to these regular programming challenges, students from Minmahaw’s programs face issues with valid documentation required for higher education.

Shortage of Support for Education Programs

Revolution is costly, and so is running independent education programs outside of a state budget. The NUG operates solely on the mandate given by the people, while other education providers are driven by the motivation to ensure that young people continue to receive education during these challenging times.

Since its formation, the NUG has organized fundraising campaigns and projects to raise funds. Among these, the income generated from the Spring Lottery goes to the Ministry of Education, and a monthly budget of 5,000,000 Myanmar kyats has been allocated to support CDM participants, according to Minister Ja Htoi Pan. However, due to limited funds, the ministry is unable to support

the majority of CDM participants. Ja Htoi Pan said, “We currently have over 100,000 CDM participants, but we can only support a part of them... less than 10%. We have a dedicated CDM department working full-time on these support activities, although the resources are limited. Nonetheless, we continue our efforts to support the CDM participants.”

When asked about international support, the minister mentioned that while some organizations collaborate with the NUG, securing international assistance remains difficult. International aid typically requires recipients to submit detailed documentation, including project concept notes, budget proposals, proof of financial accountabili-

ty, and program quality assessments. Many education providers, especially those in rural or liberated areas, struggle to provide these documents for grant applications. Khin Sandar Nyunt shares similar challenges applying for international aid and grants online despite poor internet connectivity in Karenni State. She questioned whether grant organizations consider the on-ground realities faced by Myanmar’s education providers. “Sometimes I want to ask if the international organizations are in touch with the on-ground situation or the actors on the ground. Not everything appears online, and they cannot just focus on what is publicly available. Some people are taking significant actions for the revolution on the ground, and there are confidential cases that cannot go online. Some work must be done discreetly, otherwise, the military’s planes and convoys will come. They need to understand the situations on the ground to assess what is needed for the people.”

Dr. K Roi echoed her frustration, with a slightly more reserved remark. “We had a foreign

volunteer teacher at one point. When he tried to ask for support from his government to help our school, we were asked to share detailed information including the location of the teachers. Since our institutes are in a liberation region, their government cannot approve and recognize us to give us support. In order to be recognized, we have to register with the government to receive official support, which we cannot do.”

In addition to funding, education providers need support in the form of textbooks, teaching materials, and capacity-building programs for teachers. As the people of Myanmar continue their boycott against the military regime, various communities and stakeholders are stepping up to fill gaps across many sectors. Their hope is to eradicate military rule and achieve a federal democratic state. Old and new institutions, with the support of local communities, are working tirelessly to provide education because, as the nation envisions a brighter future, education truly cannot wait.

On June 14, the NUG announced the formation of the Interim Federal Education Council (IEFC), calling for a collaboration and unity of all political forces and educational organizations of ethnic groups. The Council’s primary objective is to operate with mutual respect and recognition, allowing all federal units to autonomously manage their education systems while ensuring that diverse education systems within the federal union remain interconnected and cooperative.

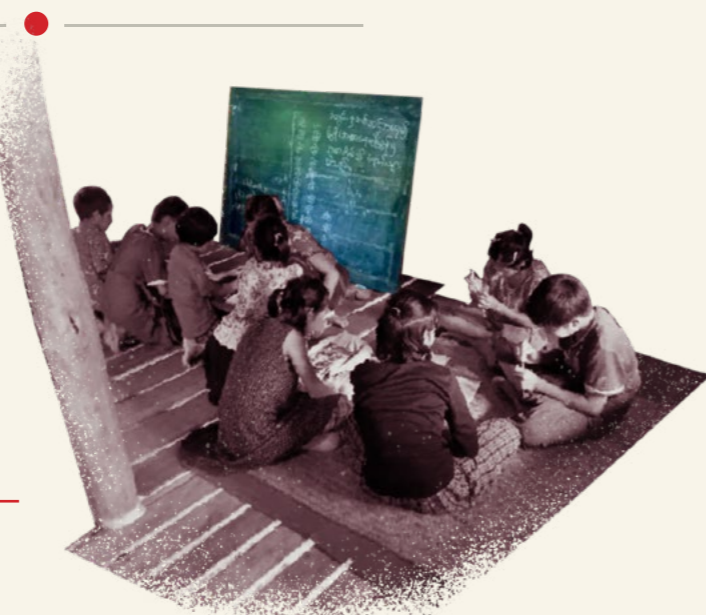
Ja Htoi Pan emphasized that the new federal education system will reflect a decentralized approach, moving away from the previous centralization. “Due to the CDM movement and the introduction of federal education policies, our working culture has shifted. There is no longer strict centralization or top-down directives. Instead, it is now more collaborative, involving more stakeholders. Whenever we develop policies, we always consult on the ground to ensure feasibility. Some policies are developed together with teachers on the ground, such as the policy on Township Education Boards, to tailor to their specific needs.”

Ko Nan Lin, a critic of Myanmar’s education system, acknowledged these efforts by the NUG and found them promising, despite some

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challenges. “The NUG’s MOE focuses on student understanding rather than rote-learning and exam scores, which, despite implementation challenges, is a concept we support. The NUG’s reforms, such as not basing entrance solely on exam scores and allowing limitless attempts to enter desirable universities, are commendable. Additionally, efforts to connect education institutions of Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs) and promote federal education are promising.”

Khin Sandar Nyunt envisions a system with diverse programs that allows students the freedom to choose paths that resonate with them. “We should have the right to choose what we like, and there should be many options to choose from too. If one doesn’t want to go to a non-government school or public school, there should be alternatives



to choose from. If someone wants homeschooling, there should be a policy that guarantees and supports this form.” She also supports a more decentralized and federal approach to education. “Education encompasses a wide variety of fields, and there must be different teaching styles and classes. Everything cannot be defined in a single pattern, and we must not impose a single pattern on people from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and social conditions. Most importantly, education must be free and of good quality.”

Despite the obstacles and limited resources, Myanmar’s efforts to provide education continue. The instability has driven actors to develop and implement a more decentralized approach to education. Although there have been visible shifts and improvements over the past three years, the real acceleration of these reforms depends on the fall of the military dictatorship and the rise of a federal government.

Seng, a student in Kachin pursuing higher education despite ongoing bombings and airstrikes, expressed a wish for a future government that values education and embraces the country’s diverse cultures and ethnic groups. “My dream for the future is to have governments that care deeply about education. I want a government that will preserve the history of every ethnicity and

its philosophy and celebrate all of the diverse languages we have in our country. I wish for teachers who will cultivate critical thinking in young kids and show no discrimination between different cultures, languages, and ethnicities.”

Her fellow Kachin teacher is on the same page. Dr. K J Roi believed education in Myanmar should be kept abreast with changes happening in the world. “If we can’t keep up with the changes, we will be left behind. Education is important for people of all ethnicities, whether Burmese, Kachin, or any ethnic group, it’s particularly important for those who are internally displaced and fleeing from fighting.”

“I am hopeful for an education system that can teach students to think for themselves instead of just learning everything by heart and writing it down on paper, which cannot be applied in real life. I want our students to feel secure in their lives and their future,” she added.

Despite the ongoing challenges, Myanmar’s alternative educational efforts are pushing towards a more decentralized and inclusive approach. The success of these programs hinges on overcoming practical difficulties and securing the necessary support and resources to create a resilient education system amidst the current instability.

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