



Breaking Gender and Age Barriers amid Myanmar's Spring Revolution

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What's new? Young people, particularly young women, have been visible and important contributors to the anti-military resistance, challenging age and gender norms in patriarchal Myanmar society. Yet two years after the coup they remain largely excluded from formal political power, and their role in the opposition movement often goes unacknowledged.

Why does it matter? Older men have traditionally dominated Myanmar politics – Aung San Suu Kyi being a notable exception. Policy priorities are skewed to women's and youth's detriment. The outcome of Myanmar's post-coup crisis is uncertain, but changing norms within the anti-military resistance may well shape politics and society more broadly.

What should be done? The parallel National Unity Government should move beyond tokenism to genuinely include women and youth from diverse backgrounds in decision-making to build its credibility and break down patriarchal barriers. Donors should increase support for women- and youth-led organisations, while anti-regime armed groups should review the gendered way they assign recruits.

I. Overview

A young generation, particularly women, are at the forefront of Myanmar's armed and non-violent resistance to the 2021 coup d'état, challenging longstanding age and gender norms and hierarchies. Post-coup opposition movements have created opportunities for these people to take on roles that earlier were off limits. Their power within the movements remains limited, however, and intensified fighting in much of the country further jeopardises it. The National Unity Government and other anti-regime forces have strong normative reasons to address this problem. They would also gain from doing so, in that otherwise they may lose core supporters' sympathies. They should do more to deepen inclusion, particularly of women and youth from diverse socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds. Armed groups should move from assigning people to posts based on gender, possibly by giving both men and women more choice in how they are deployed. No end is in sight to Myanmar's crisis and its outcome is far from

clear, but changing norms within the resistance are likely to influence the country's politics and society over time.

Prior to the coup, political power in Myanmar lay almost exclusively in the hands of older men. Aung San Suu Kyi, the elected National League for Democracy (NLD) leader ousted by the coup, was a notable exception, in part because she is Western-educated and the daughter of independence leader Aung San. There was progress toward greater inclusivity during the ten years of semi-civilian rule, between 2011 and 2021, but deeply entrenched conservative attitudes and practical barriers erected during half a century of military dictatorship served to keep most women and young people out of formal politics. In some respects, the NLD was even less inclusive than its predecessor, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, to the disappointment of activists, civil society figures and some within the party itself.

The coup has helped bring to the fore a new generation, who were instrumental in launching what they call the Spring Revolution in its aftermath, organising nationwide demonstrations, strikes and boycotts. This younger cohort, including Generation Z and millennials, came of age during the decade of semi-civilian governance and has refused to accept a return to military rule. Their views only hardened as the regime brutally cracked down on their largely peaceful protests. From martyred demonstrators to striking garment workers and teachers leading the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), they have been a powerful symbol of resistance to the junta. They have used their position to challenge traditional age and gender norms and push a progressive agenda, particularly in the political sphere.

Although these youngsters are the driving force of the movement, they have limited clout in its internal councils. Over time, the more inclusive facets of the revolution, such as street protests and the CDM, have lost influence to newly formed armed resistance groups, which are focused on fighting. Not surprisingly, the division of labour within these groups' ranks is heavily gendered. Although women are often active participants behind the scenes – for example, crafting homemade weapons or raising money – their contributions often go unrecognised.

Although featuring a significant number of ex-NLD figures, the new anti-regime political structures, such as the National Unity Government (NUG) and National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), are more diverse than the NLD-era government and parliament. Diversity is more evident in terms of ethnicity than age or gender, however. Although the NUG has several women ministers, most of the top positions remain held by older men. The same is true of Myanmar's ethnic armed groups, which predate the military takeover but whose sway has grown in the post-coup conflict. Apart from cultural attitudes that favour older male leaders, socio-economic factors remain a barrier to broader inclusion, particularly for women.

Meanwhile, the military regime has closed off what few opportunities existed for younger people, and women of all ages, to exercise political leadership. The junta is dominated by serving and former military officers, making it highly unrepresentative of Myanmar society, and all indications are that general elections planned for late 2023 or early 2024 will bring only cosmetic change. Despite the junta's claims to the contrary, the vote is intended to entrench military control of nominally civilian structures, such as the national assembly. Directly or indirectly, power will still reside in the military elite, most of whom are older Burman men, possibly with token inclusion of ethnic minorities and women.

With the armed struggle gaining momentum from mid-2021, progress toward greater inclusivity has largely stalled within the resistance. Civil society leaders and foreign technical advisers can provide support, but senior opposition members in bodies such as the NUG will need to throw weight behind any effort to jumpstart such change. Doing so matters not just for the immediate term: while it is far from clear how the tragedy currently befalling Myanmar will shape its future, evolving age and gender norms in the resistance could have a positive lasting impact on Myanmar politics and society. Even beyond important normative concerns, NUG leaders would gain by including women and young people in political decision-making and listening to their perspectives; failure to do so could alienate important sources of support. Meanwhile, civil society groups and NGOs, primarily from Myanmar, should engage the armed resistance – including ethnic armed groups – in discussions about injecting a gender dimension into their own policies, such as by degendering job assignments and addressing harassment.

II. An Old Man's World

Younger people and women have historically wielded little formal political power in Myanmar.¹ Although the country is ethnically diverse, most of its communities are patriarchal with strong cultures of deference to elders. In many ethnic communities, including the Burman majority, the two dominant institutions are armed groups and organised religions, both of which have tended to reinforce age hierarchy and – to an even greater degree – patriarchal gender norms. Occasional ruptures, notably World War II and the 1962 coup, have overturned the old establishment and brought in groups of younger men to take its place. But these upheavals, if anything, have strengthened the hold of men on power, meaning that the “traditional connection between masculinity and authority remained largely unchanged”.² Furthermore, the men who had dislodged their elders generally clung to their prerogatives as they aged, in time becoming a new old establishment.

Myanmar's legacy of conflict, with unresolved wars that date back to its independence in 1948 in many of the country's ethnic areas, has only served to strengthen the

¹ For analysis of events since the 1 February 2021 coup, see Crisis Group Asia Briefings N°s 166, *Responding to the Myanmar Coup*, 16 February 2021; 167, *The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse*, 1 April 2021; 168, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup*, 28 June 2021; 170, *The Deadly Stalemate in Post-Coup Myanmar*, 20 October 2021; 171, *Resisting the Resistance: Myanmar's Pro-military Pyusawhti Militias*, 6 April 2022; and 173, *Coming to Terms with Myanmar's Russia Embrace*, 4 August 2022; as well as Crisis Group Asia Reports N°s 314, *Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield*, 18 May 2021; 319, *Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts*, 12 January 2022; 325, *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State*, 1 June 2022; and 328, *Crowdfunding a War: The Money behind Myanmar's Resistance*, 20 December 2022. See also Richard Horsey, “A Close-up View of Myanmar's Leaderless Mass Protests”, Crisis Group Commentary, 26 February 2021; and “One Year On from the Myanmar Coup”, Crisis Group Commentary, 25 January 2022; and Thomas Kean, “Five Years On, Rohingya Refugees Face Dire Conditions and a Long Road Ahead”, Crisis Group Commentary, 22 August 2022.

² Zin Mar Aung, “From Military Patriarchy to Gender Equity: Including Women in the Democratic Transition in Burma”, *Social Research*, vol. 82, no. 2 (2015), pp. 531-551.

writ of older men.³ Over five decades of military rule, from 1962 to 2011, serving and former military officers came to dominate formal political institutions, including government, political parties, the civil service and the judiciary.⁴ Though independence hero Aung San and many of the country's first post-independence leaders had emerged from university politics, the military came to see students mainly as a threat to its rule – not entirely without justification, since students led major protests against the socialist regime in 1962, 1974 and 1988.⁵ During this period, many ethnic minorities formed armed resistance movements to fight for greater autonomy, with men occupying virtually all leadership positions.

After independence, and particularly the 1962 coup, women were barred from serving in the military, except as nurses (and in a few other roles). Given the centrality of the military in Myanmar politics, a major avenue to power was thus closed off to women.

Ethnic Burman women were nevertheless described as something of an exception. They were said to have “high status” and to enjoy “inherent equality” with their male counterparts. Though that was not quite true, Burman women did often have greater rights and freedoms than women elsewhere in Asia, and some rose to prominence in politics, business and other fields.⁶ Aung San Suu Kyi is the best-known example.⁷

Flawed as this notion was, the military saw it as useful. After the end of the socialist regime in 1988, the State Law and Order Restoration Council junta seized on it as an ideological prop. The idea became part of what one scholar has described as a project of “Myanmafication” – creation of a national “Myanmar culture” based on Burman Buddhism – that the generals pursued to consolidate their rule after the failure of socialism.⁸ The military began claiming that all women in Myanmar had “inherent equality” with men. It signed Myanmar up to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), and vehemently denied the regular reports that its soldiers were perpetrating sexual violence against ethnic minorities.⁹ By insisting that Myanmar women already had equality – even if the original narrative had

³ For an overview of Myanmar's armed conflicts since independence, see Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London, 1999).

⁴ Yoshihiro Nakanishi, *Strong Soldiers, Failed Revolution: The State and Military in Burma, 1962-88* (Singapore, 2013).

⁵ The military's tendency to see students as a threat is reflected in the only reference to young people in the 2008 constitution. Section 33 states: “The Union shall strive for youth to have strong and dynamic patriotic spirit, the correct way of thinking and to develop the five noble strengths”. The constitution does not specify the “five noble strengths”, but these are faith, knowledge, perseverance, stability and prudence – elements of a Burmese Buddhist ideal. See Melissa Crouch, *The Constitution of Myanmar: A Textual Analysis* (Oxford, 2019), p. 33.

⁶ See, for example, Chie Ikeya, “The ‘Traditional’ High Status of Women in Burma: A Historical Reconsideration”, *Journal of Burma Studies*, vol. 10 (2005-2006), pp. 51-81.

⁷ Aung San Suu Kyi graduated from both the University of New Delhi and St Hugh's College Oxford in the 1960s. In the 1980s, she studied at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies.

⁸ Gustaaf Houtman, *Mental Culture in Burmese Crisis Politics: Aung San Suu Kyi and the National League for Democracy* (Tokyo, 1999), pp. 138-141.

⁹ Zin Mar Aung, op. cit., p. 542.

extended only to Burman women, and not minorities – the regime in effect reinforced the status quo of exclusion.¹⁰

One area in which women and youth were able to build influence was in civil society. After the 1988 uprising, many women and youth from central Myanmar who had participated in the protests fled to border areas to continue their anti-military struggle. Some enlisted in armed movements, such as the newly formed All Burma Students' Democratic Front, while many others joined or established NGOs. From around the same time, associations affiliated with ethnic armed groups, such as the Karen Women's Organisation, began to work on strengthening women's roles in the movements' armed wings, and were later instrumental in forming the Women's League of Burma, a border-based NGO that promotes women's participation in politics. Women were also prominent in civil society in military-controlled parts of Myanmar, even during periods of particularly marked oppression, and their role grew significantly after Cyclone Nargis, in 2008, when international aid to Myanmar – much of it channelled through NGOs and community-based organisations – increased greatly.¹¹

The period leading up to political liberalisation in 2011 saw the military take steps reinforcing the old nexus of maleness, age and political power. It wrote this linkage into the 2008 constitution, which it drafted to facilitate a transition to quasi-civilian rule. The charter nominally granted equal rights to women, but with the caveat that “nothing ... shall prevent appointment of men to the positions that are suitable for men only”. Further, by ensuring the primacy of the military in politics, the constitution in effect blocks women from positions of influence. Nothing in the constitution, meanwhile, prohibits discrimination on the basis of age; on the contrary, it sets a minimum age for all elected and many appointed positions.¹²

After liberalisation, the military also tried to soften its image as a male-dominated institution. In 2013, it amended its recruitment policies, placing an advertisement for women cadets, and the following year it appointed the first women officers to serve in parliament.¹³ Recruitment of women to the military-controlled police force also expanded significantly.¹⁴ These policies had their limits, however: women cadets were commissioned at a lower rank than their male counterparts, and they were mainly confined to support roles that stunted opportunities for advancement.¹⁵ Women entering the military and police force encountered various other kinds of institutional-

¹⁰ Jenny Hedström, Elisabeth Olivius and Kay Soe, “Women's Rights: Change and Continuity”, in Adam Simpson and Nicholas Farrelly (eds.), *Myanmar: Politics, Economy and Society* (London, 2020), pp. 186-203.

¹¹ A category 4 tropical cyclone, Nargis hit Myanmar's Ayeyarwady Delta on 2-3 May 2008, killing almost 140,000 people and affecting millions more.

¹² On working rights, see Section 352. Examples of age criteria include the president (minimum age of 45 years), Union ministers (40 years), and members of the upper (30 years) and lower (25 years) houses of the national assembly. Myanmar is far from alone in setting the minimum age of candidacy above the voting age, but its requirements are at the more restrictive end of the spectrum. Many countries, particularly in Europe, have lowered the age of candidacy to match that of voting eligibility (usually eighteen).

¹³ “For first time in 50 years, Burma's military welcomes women officers”, *The Irrawaddy*, 29 August 2014.

¹⁴ Andrew Selth, “Burma: Police reforms expand women's roles”, Lowy Interpreter (blog), 1 May 2015.

¹⁵ Miemie Winn Byrd, “Integration of Women and Gender Perspectives into the Myanmar Armed Forces to Improve Civil-Military Relations in Myanmar”, *Military Review*, November-December 2019.

ised discrimination.¹⁶ Gendered roles also persisted outside the military, such as in opposition movements, where women were often relegated to jobs behind the scenes.¹⁷

Meanwhile, liberalisation created new opportunities for women and youth in the political sphere, if not in the upper echelons. Older men from military backgrounds dominated President Thein Sein's various cabinets from 2011-2016, as well as national and regional assemblies formed based on the 2010 election results; although two women were appointed as ministers, they were assigned education and social welfare, both portfolios closely associated with "women's affairs" in most Myanmar people's minds. The NLD's success in the 2012 by-elections brought greater diversity to parliament – almost one third of its candidates were women, and many were younger than average – and Thein Sein's government started engaging with a wide range of social actors, including on policy development.¹⁸ Women and younger people were highly visible in civil society, particularly NGOs, but also newly formed student and labour unions.

There were, however, still clear limitations to women and youth participating in political life. Both the military and ethnic armed groups mostly excluded women from the peace process that Thein Sein launched in 2011, and no side ever met the gender quotas that negotiators included in a 2016 framework for political dialogue, which began that year and continued until 2020.¹⁹ Although the Department of Social Welfare began drafting a Protection and Prevention of Violence against Women Law in early 2011, in part to bring Myanmar law into compliance with CEDAW, it was never enacted; instead, the government and parliament, under pressure from nationalist groups, passed four "protection of race and religion laws", including legislation restricting the right of Buddhist women to marry men of other faiths.²⁰ A proposed Ministry of Youth Affairs never came into being. The government did introduce a National Strategic Plan for the Advancement of Women, along with a National Youth Policy, but both of these initiatives "remained largely on paper and did not lead to tangible results".²¹

Hopes that the NLD, once in power, would drive efforts to break down gender and age hierarchies were quickly dashed. In March 2016, soon after winning the election by a landslide, it named an eighteen-member cabinet including only one woman, party leader Aung San Suu Kyi herself, and with an average age of 65; the three youngest members were, ironically, serving officers appointed by the military.²² It later ex-

¹⁶ "The Role of Women in Myanmar's Evolving Security Institutions", U.S. Institute of Peace, 15 December 2022.

¹⁷ Hedström et al., "Women's Rights: Change and Continuity", op. cit.

¹⁸ See Paul Minoletti, "Gender (In)Equality in the Governance of Myanmar: Past, Present and Potential Strategies for Change", The Asia Foundation, April 2016; and Renaud Egreteau, *Crafting Parliament in Myanmar's Disciplined Democracy* (Oxford, 2022), pp. 100-133.

¹⁹ See "Where are the women in Myanmar's peace process?", *Myanmar Now*, December 2015; and "Women in Ethnic Armed Organizations in Myanmar", Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2019.

²⁰ "Developing Anti-Violence Against Women Laws", Gender Equality Network, January 2013; "Procedural and Substantive Suggestions for the Proposed Protection and Prevention of Violence Against Women Law", Women's League of Burma, February 2019; and Crisis Group Asia Report N°290, *Buddhism and State Power in Myanmar*, 5 September 2017.

²¹ "Inclusion and Gender Equality in Post-Coup Myanmar", International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, May 2022, pp. 2-3.

²² "U Htin Kyaw's inaugural cabinet: A demographic profile", Fifty Viss (blog), 26 March 2016.

panded the cabinet to 51 members, but only one other woman joined, making the government more than 95 per cent male. Nearly all key positions in parliament and other national bodies, such as the Union Election Commission, also went to older men, as did state and regional cabinet posts. Party stalwart Win Htein, who was central in the cabinet selection, said many of the NLD women who wanted to run for office were too “green” and “inexperienced”. “The culture here and the religion mean most women are not naturally confident in political situations”, he added.²³

But the NLD also largely ignored and even stifled civil society, which had been an important venue where women and younger people could influence decision-making. The NLD was less open to engaging civil society and seeking policy advice than its predecessor, the Union Solidarity and Development Party; it appeared to view activists in particular as troublemakers. It placed restrictions on its legislators that made it difficult for them to participate in civil society initiatives, and in some cases it forced civil society organisations to seek permission before holding public events.²⁴ Activists were routinely subjected to harassment and intimidation, particularly by the security forces, and the increased application of repressive laws had a chilling effect.²⁵ In the bureaucracy, the Union Civil Service Board regularly advertised men-only positions, on the basis that they were not suitable for women.²⁶

The NLD's second term, scheduled to begin in March 2021, seemed unlikely to bring much change. The party had fielded more women than in the 2015 election, and as a result 17.3 per cent of lawmakers in the incoming legislature would have been women, up from 14.2 per cent in 2016. The new cohort was also slightly younger, with an average age of 53.5 years, compared to 54 years in 2016 and 58 after the 2012 by-elections.²⁷ But despite these modest improvements, there was little to suggest the party was planning to make its cabinet more inclusive. Similarly, neither gender nor youth concerns appeared to be high on its agenda – its manifesto for the 2020 election was almost the same as the one in 2015, and its posture toward civil society did not shift during the campaign.

III. A New Post-coup Reality

A. *The Youth Take the Lead*

When the military seized power in February 2021, younger generations responded decisively. Filling the void left by the arrest of the NLD leaders and a number of prominent older activists, they devised a series of creative campaigns to challenge the new regime. “You’ve messed with the wrong generation” became both a warning and a rallying cry repeated in newspaper headlines around the world in the first days

²³ Fiona MacGregor, “No confidence, or no opportunity?”, *Myanmar Times*, 20 November 2015.

²⁴ “Nonviolent Action in Myanmar: Challenges and Lessons for Civil Society and Donors”, U.S. Institute of Peace, 18 September 2020, pp. 11-14.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ “The exclusion of women in Myanmar politics helped fuel the military coup”, *The Conversation*, 21 February 2021.

²⁷ Egretreau, *Crafting Parliament in Myanmar's Disciplined Democracy*, op. cit., p. 107.

after the coup.²⁸ Although protests in big cities got the most attention, demonstrations erupted across most of the country, bridging urban-rural, socio-economic, ethnic and religious divides.²⁹

Generation Z and millennials have since remained the driving force behind popular resistance to military rule.³⁰ Most members of these age cohorts entered adulthood shortly before or during the period of political liberalisation after 2011 – for example, an estimated 4.8 million members of Generation Z were able to vote for the first time in the November 2020 election. They had few personal memories of military rule, but they equated it in their minds with poverty, isolation and repression. Not only are they unwilling to return to this dark past, but they have also issued demands that go much further, pushing the political debate in a progressive direction.

The first public signs of organised resistance emerged the day after the coup, on 2 February, when junior government medical staff launched the CDM, refusing to work for the new regime. Within days, labour leaders, human rights activists and student union members such as Tayzar San, Ei Thinzar Maung, Esther Ze Naw, Moe Sandar Myint and Wai Moe Naing – all in their twenties and early thirties – initiated street protests. Both the CDM and peaceful street protests swelled quickly: millions of people took part in the demonstrations, and hundreds of thousands of civil servants joined the strike. In the capital Naypyitaw, meanwhile, a group of around 70 MPs-elect from the NLD took an “oath of office” on 4 February, in defiance of the military, and established a rival legislative body, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, the following day; in April, the Committee formed the NUG.

Strikes, protests and parallel parliaments are all established opposition movement tactics in Myanmar.³¹ But the tech-savvy younger generations combined them with new techniques as well as knowledge from abroad to create hybrid “repertoires of contention”.³² The internet, and more broadly exposure to the outside world over the past decade, not only helped inspire this innovation but also magnified its impact.³³ Examples are many and varied. Protesters adopted the three-finger salute from *The Hunger Games* film series, which people in Hong Kong and Thailand had popularised earlier, but also learned from their peers in those countries how to counteract the effects of tear gas. Themed protests – such as the massive “five twos” demonstration on 22 February, which mobilised an estimated five million protesters – were organised

²⁸ See for example, “What is happening in Myanmar? ‘They messed with the wrong generation’”, TRT World, 12 February 2021.

²⁹ The main exception to this was areas where ethnic armed groups had discouraged protests, such as in parts of Rakhine State under the influence of the Arakan Army and territory controlled by the United Wa State Army.

³⁰ Demographers use different date ranges for millennials and Generation Z. The most common is that used by Pew Research Center, which defines millennials as those born from 1981 to 1996, and Generation Z from 1997 to 2012.

³¹ People in Myanmar have employed these resistance strategies against both colonial and military rulers since the early 20th century. Examples include the oil workers’ strike of 1938, mass street protests in 1988 and the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma, formed in 1990 after the junta failed to honour the results of that year’s election.

³² Renaud Egretreau, “Blending Old and New Repertoires of Contention in Myanmar’s Anti-coup Protests”, *Social Movement Studies*, 28 October 2022.

³³ Ibid.

through Facebook, while Twitter was used to share information about #WhatsHappeningInMyanmar with the world.

The importance of the internet in mobilising anti-military movements was evident from the regime's many efforts to block access to it. These were, however, largely unsuccessful because many users found ways around the restrictions, often thanks to advice they found (and then shared) online.³⁴ Researchers have highlighted the importance of internet-based expertise that was developed prior to the coup, such as advocacy with Facebook (to get the platform to take down hate speech and pro-military propaganda) and digital security training for activists and journalists.³⁵ The mostly younger people working on these issues had less success in lobbying the NLD government, which largely ignored their campaigns for reforming defamation laws and improving digital rights and security. Nevertheless, after the coup, the experience they gained spread to the broader population, playing a "crucial role in enabling a disruptive and resilient grassroots resistance" to the junta's attempt at "complete autocratization of Myanmar".³⁶

The internet was important not only for mobilising protests, but also in enabling more open discussion of revolutionary goals among a wide audience. "What really sets this moment apart from other revolutionary moments [in Myanmar] is that a lot of it is online", commented a gender expert. "This helped ... change ideas around gender and age, and when the crackdown came, that debate could still continue online".³⁷

Both online and in the streets, the anti-coup movement energised many young people who had previously been uninterested in politics.³⁸ A 21-year-old protest leader from Yangon told Crisis Group that prior to February 2021 he had been working in his mother's business and playing music. On the morning of the coup, she woke him to break the news. He attended the first rallies more out of curiosity than commitment to the cause, but he grew angry at the increasing violence and the mendacity of regime propaganda. By mid-2021, he had become a protest leader, and has remained in the city despite the military's crackdown, coordinating flash mob protests in his township.³⁹

B. Women at the Barricades

Young women were highly visible on the protest front lines; by one estimate, they made up 60 per cent of protesters in the initial days after the coup.⁴⁰ Their presence alone was a direct challenge to the patriarchal values that the regime embodied. When soldiers and police began using live rounds to disperse the protesters, several women were among the first killed. Mya Thwe Thwe Khine, the first protester to fall under

³⁴ See Crisis Group Report, *Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield*, op. cit.

³⁵ Megan Ryan and Mai Van Tran, "Democratic Backsliding Disrupted: The Role of Digitalized Resistance in Myanmar", *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics*, 3 October 2022.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Crisis Group interview, academic focused on gender in Myanmar, December 2022.

³⁸ See, for example, Naomi Gingold, "Executing this hip-hop star could be rogue state's biggest mistake", *The Daily Beast*, 5 August 2022. Before the coup, however, some had cautioned against making generalisations about youth apathy toward politics. Nyi Nyi Kyaw, "Apathetic Young Voters in Myanmar? Think Again", ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 19 February 2020.

³⁹ Crisis Group interview, protest leader, Yangon, December 2022.

⁴⁰ "No to Dictatorship, No to Patriarchy: Women's Activism in Myanmar", *Peace for Asia*, 25 June 2021.

the security forces' fire, and Kyal Sin, a 19-year-old from Mandalay who was shot dead on 3 March while wearing a T-shirt with the words, "Everything will be ok", became martyrs for the movement, stoking anger at the regime's brutality.⁴¹ The outrage reflected the widely held idea that men have a duty to protect women, who are cast as vulnerable; that the military killed women protesters was thus seen as particularly egregious. When the crackdown intensified, women were often ushered to the rear for their safety, leaving young men to don homemade protective equipment in front of the makeshift barricades.⁴²

In some cases, though, the protests were able to turn the regime's misogyny against it. In March 2021, protesters in Yangon strung women's sarongs, known as *htamein*, high across the streets in both a symbolic denunciation of patriarchal customs and a way to take advantage of them. They were playing on a traditional Burman belief that a man's innate masculine power, or *hpone*, is diminished if he passes below a woman's undergarments.⁴³ Young male protesters showed their disdain for the taboo by walking freely underneath the *htamein*. But the garments also slowed the security forces in pursuit, who stopped to take them down.⁴⁴ In a similar vein, women painted sanitary napkins red to simulate blood, hanging them up in the street or attaching them to photos of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing. Women activists have also formed new groups to challenge gender norms and promote solidarity, such as the Women Advocacy Coalition, which is pushing for gender sensitivity in new democratic institutions, and Sisters2Sisters, which draws attention to the military's use of excessive force and sexual violence against women.

C. *A Force to Reckon With*

While the protesters' initial demands focused on restoring the NLD administration and respecting the results of the 2020 election, they shifted rapidly, with ethnic, gender and religious equality becoming central themes. Protesters called for abolishing the 2008 constitution (drafted under the previous military regime), creating a more equitable political system and establishing a new military – a "federal army" – under civilian control. The emergence of the NUCC in March 2021 and the NUG the following month lent impetus to these goals, including by enshrining them in a Federal Democracy Charter designed to replace the 2008 constitution.⁴⁵

The charter marks a break with the policies of not only the military, but also the NLD. It goes much further, for example, than the changes to the 2008 constitution

⁴¹ "We will not run!": 19-year-old's death inspires Myanmar protesters – and inflames crisis", *Los Angeles Times*, 4 March 2021.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, woman who took part in protests, December 2022. Some women stayed among the "frontliners", however. "We are frontliners': Youth brave bullets and arrest to keep protests alive", *Frontier Myanmar*, 12 March 2021.

⁴³ "With htamein barricades and flags, protesters launch a revolution within a revolution", *Frontier Myanmar*, 10 March 2021.

⁴⁴ The *htamein* protest has a historical precedent: in 2007, activists living outside Myanmar launched a Panties for Peace campaign, urging women to send packages of underwear to Myanmar embassies. The campaign does not appear to have gained traction inside the country, however.

⁴⁵ The NUCC was formed as a consultative platform to set policies for the NUG to carry out. See "Myanmar's National Unity Government: A Radical Arrangement to Counteract the Coup", ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 28 January 2022.

that the NLD government attempted to pass in 2015 and 2020, all of which the military vetoed.⁴⁶ Part 1 of the charter prohibits discrimination on the basis of gender – as the 2008 constitution nominally does – but also makes numerous other references to gender equality, including instituting a 30 per cent quota for women in “different levels of decision-making mechanisms”.⁴⁷ Additionally, it stipulates the creation of “independent commissions” for women’s rights and children’s rights, youth affairs and gender equality, as well as gender-based violence and domestic violence.⁴⁸ The interim provisions also say women’s and youth affairs groups should be included in the NUCC and a People’s Assembly.⁴⁹

The NUG’s composition embodies some of these aspirations. Although Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD President Win Myint – both in detention since the morning of the coup – remain nominally at the head of the NUG, the parallel administration is far more diverse than the previous NLD administration. At the time of writing, women comprise 20 per cent of its cabinet members, while ethnic and religious minorities make up more than 50 per cent. Based on information available, the cabinet members’ average age is 59 years – compared to 65 for the 2016 NLD administration at the start of its term – although the real figure is likely significantly lower.⁵⁰ The NUCC also has a diverse membership, including representatives of ethnic armed groups and political parties, human rights groups, civil society organisations, the CDM, strike committees and more.⁵¹

By the time of the NUG’s formation, the anti-military struggle was already taking on a more revolutionary character. Peaceful protests had largely dissipated in the face of the violent crackdown, with at least 750 civilians killed within three months of the coup.⁵² Thousands of the most determined activists were secretly travelling to the territory of ethnic armed groups for military training, while new anti-military armed groups were forming in many rural areas. On 5 May, the NUG announced the formation of the People’s Defence Force (PDF), and on 7 September it launched a “people’s defensive war”. Some of the hundreds – if not thousands – of new armed groups called themselves PDF units and aligned publicly with the NUG, but many

⁴⁶ For an overview, see “Looking Back at the Myanmar Constitution Amendment Process”, International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 8 April 2020.

⁴⁷ See “Federal Democracy Charter Part 1”, National Unity Consultative Council, January 2022. The charter was declared on 31 March 2021, and a revised version was ratified by a People’s Assembly convened from 27-29 January 2022. This briefing refers to the text of the revised version.

⁴⁸ The purpose of these commissions is not explicitly stated in the Federal Democracy Charter.

⁴⁹ The People’s Assembly was formed “with the participation of all forces with common goals of the ultimate end of dictatorship and establishment of the Federal Democratic Union”. The first People’s Assembly was held in January 2022.

⁵⁰ Not all ages are publicly disclosed. Most of those for whom date of birth was unavailable are among the younger cabinet members.

⁵¹ The NUCC website has a list of member organisations, but not of individual members.

⁵² As of 30 April 2021, the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) said it had confirmed that 759 people had been killed since the coup, and close to 3,500 detained, but cautioned that the actual number of fatalities is “likely much higher”. Since then, the group’s tally has risen to more than 2,700 dead and 17,000 arrested (this figure does not include those killed in combat). See the Association’s website for full details.

remained independent.⁵³ Most members of both types of PDFs and other anti-military armed groups are young, often still in their teens or early twenties.

In areas where armed resistance to the coup has been strongest, the state's administrative structures have disintegrated, and younger people have filled the vacuum, taking on leadership roles. In many parts of Sagaing Region, for example, government services are no longer functioning outside major towns. Although the military can still project power into the countryside by carrying out raids (often by using helicopters), resistance groups, which have set up embryonic administrations for delivering services, are the closest thing rural areas have to the state.

In these areas, people in their late thirties or forties – former lawmakers, teachers, military defectors and others – have emerged as community leaders, and are working together with even younger colleagues, particularly former student union members.⁵⁴ Some older community members, such as village tract administrators and senior monks, have on the other hand lost authority, either because they have not sided with the resistance or because they simply lack the knowledge necessary to exercise influence in the current circumstances. Many, however, are involved in community mobilisation for the resistance, alongside the new, younger leaders.⁵⁵

Since the coup, women have joined anti-military armed groups, including long-established ethnic armed groups, in unprecedented numbers – often in defiance of their parents and other relatives.⁵⁶ They are often pictured in mainstream and social media, undergoing boot camp-style training or holding weapons, flying in the face of longstanding beliefs – in particular, that women are too weak or too timid to be soldiers.⁵⁷ Women have even taken up senior positions in some of the new anti-military groups – something that previously would have been unthinkable – and in a few locations they have formed women-only groups, the most well-known being the Myaung Women Warriors in Sagaing Region. Initially, this group faced pushback from locals, but eventually it gained more acceptance. “At first, parents did not allow their daughters to participate”, a senior group member told Crisis Group. “But over time we managed to grow to more than 300 members. Now some parents even bring their daughters to us”.⁵⁸

Younger generations have not only provided the soldiers and support workers for newly formed armed groups, but also generated financial and other backing. As with the non-violent resistance they orchestrated in the months after the coup, they have leveraged the internet to great effect. By around May 2021, social media posts had shifted from focusing on protests and the CDM to armed struggle, often with motivational hashtags.⁵⁹ Most importantly, they have spearheaded online fundraising efforts that have generated tens of millions of dollars, if not more, for the NUG and anti-

⁵³ See Crisis Group Report, *Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw*, op. cit.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group interview, sources close to resistance groups, December 2022-January 2023.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ “Role Call: A Gendered Examination of Men and Women in Myanmar's Armed Resistance”, October 2022.

⁵⁷ “We are warriors’: Women join fight against military in Myanmar”, Al Jazeera, 16 November 2021.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior Myaung Women Warriors official, December 2022.

⁵⁹ “Democratic backsliding disrupted”, op. cit., pp. 18-20.

military resistance forces.⁶⁰ They are also a valuable source of information and intelligence for organisations such as the NUG.

The post-coup upheaval and the importance of young people to the anti-military struggle has created new avenues for them to take on leadership roles and exert influence. One 23-year-old woman Crisis Group interviewed had been a student union leader prior to the coup, but quickly emerged as a protest leader in her region. She is now a member of a nationwide General Strike Coordination Body that regularly engages with the NUG, and she also leads two teams that raise money for PDFs.

We have more opportunities to show our ability. ... The new political structures are listening to us, because they know young people have more diverse and fresh ideas, and new revolutionary methods. ... Young people nowadays are working closely with the old MPs, old government members and so on, and we exchange ideas. This shows how young people are getting more and more power and influence.⁶¹

Indeed, the heads of new bodies such as the NUG and NUCC have followed the younger generations' lead in a number of ways. In March 2021, Myanmar's permanent representative to the UN, Kyaw Moe Tun, ended a speech announcing his opposition to the regime with the three-finger salute that had emerged among young protesters in the days after the coup; it has since also been adopted by the NUG. The NUG's cautious endorsement of armed struggle that May came months after many youths had already fled to the territory of ethnic armed groups for military training. The Federal Democracy Charter also reflects the demands of youth-led protest movements. Youth activists were the first even to acknowledge, let alone apologise for, the historical discrimination and violence against the Rohingya, gestures upon which the NUG built in its Rohingya policy.⁶² They called out discrimination against the LGBT community; the NUG cabinet later included the country's first openly LGBT minister, Aung Myo Min.

On the ground, youth activists say their communities view them differently since the coup. They are no longer seen as too inexperienced or too young to take on political leadership, and their demonstrated commitment to the anti-military cause – one supported by the majority of people, across generations – means they are treated with a new level of respect. “Everyone has seen the important roles that young people and women are playing in this revolution. ... This has changed people's perspectives. Norms have been challenged and women feel more empowered to take part in politics”, a

⁶⁰ See Crisis Group Report, *Crowdfunding a War*, op. cit.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, strike committee leader, December 2022.

⁶² The NUG issued its Policy Position on the Rohingya in Rakhine State on 3 June 2021, pledging to find “shared solutions” to discrimination against this Muslim community, particularly on the issue of statelessness. The NUG acknowledged the Rohingya were entitled to citizenship, and said it would also replace the 1982 Citizenship Law with a new law that bases citizenship on birth in Myanmar or anywhere as a child of Myanmar citizens. Although the primary imperative for the statement was to gain international support, the more sympathetic attitudes toward the Rohingya that emerged following the coup from mainly younger generations were important for making it politically feasible. “Policy Position on the Rohingya in Rakhine State”, National Unity Government, 3 June 2021. For further discussion, see “The NUG's Rohingya policy: ‘Campaign statement’ or genuine reform?”, *Frontier Myanmar*, 15 July 2021.

young woman who holds a senior position in a newly formed resistance group, the Bamar People's Liberation Army, told Crisis Group.⁶³

IV. The Limits of Change

Despite the historic evolution witnessed since the coup, young people and women still face many constraints in pursuing political participation and leadership. Unlike earlier ruptures, such as independence, the old political elite has not been entirely discredited or swept away. Instead, young and old coexist in newly created institutions; as a result, older men have continued, for the most part, to hold sway. In the armed conflict, gender norms are even more difficult to overturn than age-related ones. Even in areas where younger people have come to dominate political leadership, such as in parts of Sagaing Region, men continue to hold most of the top spots. Socio-economic and educational barriers also mean that the few women who reach senior positions tend to be wealthier, Western-educated urbanites. Those from rural areas and middle and working-class backgrounds have fewer opportunities to take on leadership roles.

A. Resistance-led Political Institutions

Although the NUG cabinet is a significant improvement on the NLD government from an inclusion perspective, it is still far from representative of the Myanmar population. More progress has been made in including ethnic minorities (seven of twenty ministers and twelve of sixteen deputies) than women (four ministers and three deputies), reflecting the NUG's imperative to build ties with ethnic minorities, and particularly ethnic armed groups, in order to draw on their military prowess in fighting the junta. The NUG cabinet is younger than that of the NLD, but still features many members in their sixties and seventies. A bigger challenge is that younger members tend to be in positions that afford them less influence, and nearly all women have been assigned to what are traditionally perceived as gendered roles, such as health, education and the Ministry of Women, Youths and Children Affairs. The notable exception is Zin Mar Aung, who holds the important foreign affairs portfolio; as with many women who have managed to rise to prominence, she comes from an educated, urban background.⁶⁴

Even NUG supporters and partners observe that most of these appointments have the appearance of tokenism. Those Crisis Group spoke to noted that some women deputy ministers who resigned from the NUG were replaced by men, and that women in particular “tend to lose their voice” after being appointed to the parallel administration. “It's not meaningful participation”, one said. “The NUG should take their

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, December 2022.

⁶⁴ Zin Mar Aung is well respected both at home (she was a political prisoner for eleven years and an NLD lawmaker from 2016-2021, during which time she sat on powerful parliamentary committees) and abroad. After her release in 2009, she was involved in civil society activities that brought her into contact with embassies and international NGOs. She later received international awards and undertook a fellowship in the U.S.

opinions seriously”.⁶⁵ Numerous sources, both male and female, echoed this view. “I feel like the young people who have been appointed to the NUG are facing restrictions and cannot show their performance”, said a young protest leader from Yangon.⁶⁶

Although it features a diverse range of member organisations, and a high proportion of ethnic minority representatives, the NUCC also falls well short when it comes to women’s equal representation. The body’s exact membership has not been made public, but sources told Crisis Group that the proportion of women members was even lower than in the NUG. One NUCC member observed that none of the positions allocated to ethnic armed groups had gone to women.⁶⁷ In both the NUG and NUCC, men frequently dismiss women who raise gender-related issues. “The women on the NUCC in particular get overpowered”, one source commented. “The men say they will put gender into the agenda, but it’s always the last issue and, before they get to it, they say, ‘Time’s up’”.⁶⁸

Those who attempt to draw attention to gender barriers are also routinely told that the issue should only be addressed “after we win the revolution”.⁶⁹ Unlike other important social challenges, like improving relations with ethnic minorities or addressing historical discrimination against the Rohingya, there is less of an imperative for bodies like the NUG to make gender inclusion a priority because leaders do not see it as contributing to the armed struggle. “Norms and perspectives related to gender discrimination have not changed hugely”, commented a women’s right activist. “It’s an ongoing process, ... but the revolution has created opportunities to move toward gender equality”.⁷⁰

Those in charge of the institutions that have emerged in opposition to military rule have a strong interest in creating genuine opportunities for younger people, particularly women, to participate in decision-making. Generation Z and Millennials have been at the vanguard of the movement, and their support remains an important asset. Although those interviewed by Crisis Group continue to offer strong backing for the movement, many also evince a degree of frustration that the NUG, the NUCC and other bodies have not gone further in overturning gender and age norms through greater inclusivity.⁷¹ The movement could strengthen itself by becoming more inclusive – or at least avert the risk of pushing away some of its most important supporters.

What happens within the post-coup resistance could matter for the longer term too. Its political and armed wings have already become an important part of Myanmar’s political landscape. How Myanmar’s conflict will play out is far from clear; whatever happens, the country will likely have to navigate several poles, including the military itself, and a large part of society will likely remain conservative and religious.⁷² Still, the institutions created as part of the resistance, particularly their political culture and vision, will in all probability influence future phases of the crisis and beyond.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, activist supporting resistance forces, December 2022.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, protest leader, Yangon, December 2022.

⁶⁷ Crisis Group interview, NUCC member, December 2022.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interview, source familiar with the issue, January 2023.

⁶⁹ Crisis Group interview, activist supporting resistance forces, December 2022.

⁷⁰ Crisis Group interview, women’s rights activist, December 2022.

⁷¹ Crisis Group interviews, November 2022-January 2023.

⁷² A forthcoming Crisis Group report will address the role of Buddhist monks and nuns in the post-coup ferment.

Nurturing a greater role for young people in resistance political institutions in particular could help ensure that in the years ahead Myanmar politics is less patriarchal and more diverse. Benefits of that could be wide-ranging, from better prospects of reaching durable peace settlements to more equitable distribution of state resources.

B. *Armed Groups*

The evolution from peaceful resistance – protests, boycotts and civil disobedience – to armed struggle has tended to shunt women aside. The focus, particularly in mainstream and social media, has shifted almost entirely to fighting, which is still perceived primarily as a male act. As the conflict has intensified, spreading across much of the country, other forms of resistance have received less attention, relegating women to the background. Some women have been depicted bearing arms, as noted. But they are more commonly shown as victims or saviours, helping deliver aid or care for the displaced, for example. Meanwhile, few women appear to have taken up leadership roles in newly emergent administrative bodies run by resistance forces, which remain dominated by male fighters. One apparent reason is that while administrative bodies and armed groups are nominally separate, in practice there is often a great deal of overlap in personnel, so that men end up in high positions in administration.

Although women are highly visible in newly formed anti-military groups, and many have undergone military training, they continue to face significant gender barriers. These groups, which seek to replace the military regime with more equitable governance structures, have in fact often adopted policies that discriminate against women and reinforce gender norms. “Even though we receive the same training, we usually can’t go to the front line”, said a woman PDF member. “Options are very limited for women, other than support roles and other jobs in the villages, like teaching children who can’t go to school”.⁷³ These reports suggest that if the new armed groups do succeed in their military goals, they are unlikely to overturn barriers to gender equality, and may even undermine those within the revolutionary movement working to achieve that goal.⁷⁴

Most obviously, women are often not allowed to participate in front-line combat, and are instead confined to administrative or support roles. They can also find it difficult to gain the respect of their male colleagues. A woman who holds a senior position in the Bamar People’s Liberation Army said she was allowed to visit the front lines only for observation, to bring rations or to help injured soldiers. Her male colleagues are “shocked” to see a woman at the front, she said, and often uncooperative. She noted that age was also important, citing the example of a younger woman colleague who she believed faced even greater challenges in interacting with male soldiers. But primarily because of their gender, women feel they have to behave differently toward soldiers relative to their male counterparts.

Some will say things like, “I don’t want to talk to you. I’ll talk to someone else”, because they don’t believe in my ability. ... I have to respond to them carefully. You can’t be too humble or too confident.⁷⁵

⁷³ Crisis Group interview, PDF member, January 2023.

⁷⁴ “Role Call”, op. cit.

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, senior Bamar People’s Liberation Army member, December 2022.

Women soldiers are also held back by self-imposed restrictions, although these often appear to be a product of socialisation. For example, a senior Myaung Women Warriors officer said the group had yet to participate in front-line combat because few weapons were available. When her group has managed to secure arms, its members have so far opted to give them to men in allied units, because they themselves believed that their male colleagues were more “capable” soldiers. They see handing over the guns as a choice, not a constraint. The officer stressed, however, that the mere existence of her women-only armed group was a major step forward in Myanmar. “When people talk about PDFs, men are still the first thing that comes into their mind”, she told Crisis Group.⁷⁶ Some women soldiers have also cited concerns about the risk of suffering sexual violence at the hands of the regime’s military if they were to be captured.⁷⁷

Some women who have joined armed groups have also reported instances of sexual harassment from their male colleagues. There seem to be no adequate policies in place to prevent or redress such behaviour, which is in part a product of the groups’ masculinist culture. A woman interviewee recounted being verbally harassed multiple times by a fellow soldier, who did such things as ask her unwanted questions about her marital status. “I felt so sad, scared and helpless”, she said. “Finally, I just had to avoid being in places where I knew that he would be”.⁷⁸ Another source with knowledge of such incidents said the lack of channels to file a complaint was a major problem. “The perpetrators know that women have no one to report the cases to. It has become a great opportunity for perpetrators to commit more harassment”.⁷⁹

In comparison to the new national institutions, Myanmar’s ethnic armed groups have undergone little structural change since the coup. It is difficult to generalise about these groups’ inclusivity given their diversity in terms of size, influence and political culture. Nevertheless, all are armies first and foremost – albeit, in most cases, with governance and administrative branches – which has translated into a culture of hierarchical male leadership.⁸⁰ To some extent, the intensified conflict of the past two years appears to have strengthened this culture.⁸¹

C. *The Junta*

The military regime has rolled back much of the progress on political inclusivity that was made during Myanmar’s decade of liberalisation. Serving and former military officers dominate the upper echelons of the State Administration Council, as the junta calls itself, as well as its Union Government and state and region administrations; civilian members, who are mainly older men, have little political power.⁸² The junta

⁷⁶ Crisis Group interview, senior Myaung Women Warriors official, December 2022.

⁷⁷ “Role Call”, op. cit.

⁷⁸ Crisis Group interview, PDF member, January 2023.

⁷⁹ Crisis Group interview, women’s rights activist, January 2023.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, December 2022-January 2023.

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, December 2022-January 2023.

⁸² For profiles of the military and civilian members of the State Administration Council, and members of the regime’s Union Government, see Htet Myet Min Tun, Moe Thuzar and Michael Montesano, “Min Aung Hlaing and His Generals: Data on the Military Members of Myanmar’s State Administration Council Junta”, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 23 July 2021; “Buttressing the Anti-NLD Project: Data on the Civilian Members of Myanmar’s State Administration Council Junta”, 8 Septem-

is unlikely to change in this respect: it is pressing ahead with plans for an election in mid-2023 that is designed to entrench military control of nominally civilian political structures, such as the national assembly. Under this model, it is clear that power will remain in the hands of the military elite, either directly or indirectly, which implies that any inclusion of women and youth – for example, through election to national or state assemblies – will be token.

The regime has also limited political inclusion in other ways. Although he has not formally abrogated the peace process established under former governments, in early 2022 Min Aung Hlaing launched fresh negotiations with ten ethnic armed groups, aiming to dissuade them from joining forces with the post-coup resistance, as well as to secure their support for allowing the forthcoming election to go ahead in their territory.⁸³ As with the slew of ceasefires negotiated from 1989-1995, under the previous junta, the talks have been limited to top military officers and the leaders of participating ethnic armed groups, nearly all of whom are older men.⁸⁴ The junta has also increasingly targeted civil society, where women and youth play a prominent role. In October 2022, it introduced a new law, the Organisations Registration Law, that makes it mandatory for all NGOs, civil society groups and community associations to register with the junta (it had been voluntary under the old law from 2014) and introduces prison terms for violations of its many prohibitions.⁸⁵

More generally, official attitudes toward women and youth have reverted to the pre-2011 era. The regime is once again fashioning itself as the patron of a form of “traditional” culture – that is, a highly patriarchal “Myanmar” culture that is primarily based on Burman Buddhism – which only reinforces gender and age hierarchies. While perpetuating the gender equality narrative developed by his military predecessors, Min Aung Hlaing has simultaneously railed at photos circulating on social media of female protesters wearing “indecent clothes contrary to Myanmar culture” and prosecuted celebrities for allegedly posting sexually explicit material online.⁸⁶ He has complained of Myanmar culture being “abused and misused” on social media, and claimed that “youths are weak in their capacity to preserve their respective ethnic cultures and customs. Hence, during this short time, we have taken steps to promote and revitalise Myanmar’s traditional cultures as much as we can”.⁸⁷

ber 2021; and “An Attempt to Lead Myanmar Back to the Future? Data on the State Administration Council Regime’s Union Government”, 22 October 2021.

⁸³ Crisis Group Report, *Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar’s Rakhine State*, op. cit.

⁸⁴ The only exception is Saw Mra Raza Lin, the female leader of the Arakan Liberation Party. For an overview of the military’s peace initiatives from 1988 to 2011, see “Why Burma’s Peace Efforts Have Failed to End Its Internal Wars”, U.S. Institute of Peace, October 2020.

⁸⁵ The law’s English version was published in daily excerpts in Myanmar’s state-run newspaper, the *Global New Light of Myanmar*, from 29 October to 5 November 2022. For further discussion, see “Myanmar could face aid ‘catastrophe’, experts warn, after junta law change”, *The Guardian*, 3 November 2022.

⁸⁶ See “Chairman of State Administration Council Commander-in-Chief of Defence Services Senior General Min Aung Hlaing sends message of greeting to Myanmar Women’s Day celebrations”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 4 July 2021; “State Administration Council Chairman Senior General Min Aung Hlaing delivers address at Council meeting”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 2 March 2021; and “Insein court sentences actress Thinzar Wint Kyaw to five-year prison term”, Eleven Media Group, 26 December 2022.

⁸⁷ “Keep moving forward to achieve our goal”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 2 August 2022.

Min Aung Hlaing has adopted a patronising attitude toward the country's younger generations, blaming the NLD and NUG for inciting them to reject military rule so stubbornly. He has complained that, when in power, the NLD amended the school curriculum with material "aimed at undermining Myanmar's traditions and culture", meaning that "young people lost respect for teachers".⁸⁸ His regime has characterised protesters who became resistance fighters as "misused" by the "terrorist" NUG, accusing it of "exploiting apolitical youths" by sending them for training with ethnic armed groups.⁸⁹ The senior general's vision for students is that they be "good citizens" who "serve the interests of their local community, regions and state". Students "should adore patriotic spirit for the country and the nation as well as their religions for further flourishing", he said, also warning of the dangers of new technologies that "bring misunderstanding and misinformation".⁹⁰

Pro-military social media accounts have openly targeted young people who publicly oppose the regime, often by releasing their personal information – a practice known as "doxing". Some have also published sexually explicit content, such as revenge porn, doctored pornographic images or unfounded allegations of a sexual nature, in order to discredit individual women. In a highly patriarchal society like Myanmar's, the sexualised nature of many of these attacks on women has had a silencing effect, with some women now afraid to speak up for fear of attracting the attention of pro-military users.⁹¹ "Women are targeted more than men ... not just women leaders, but ordinary women from rural areas", an activist said.⁹²

The economic decline following the coup has hurt everyone in Myanmar, but disproportionately women and the young. Schooling has been heavily disrupted, with millions of children and young adults dropping out of the state system since 2019, first due to COVID-19 and then to a boycott of "military slave education".⁹³ As a result, many have entered the work force early, and are unlikely to return to school.⁹⁴ Many women and girls, worried about their families amid the economic crisis, are making sacrifices – such as skipping meals – to make sure their children and parents can eat. As a UN report put it, women "are starting to see their future disappear before their eyes. ... The peace, political and economic rights they enjoyed for a decade are disappearing".⁹⁵

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ "Grim fate of NUG terrorist group", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 18 September 2022.

⁹⁰ See "Naypyitaw State Academy will be facilitated with modern teaching techniques, curricula and teaching aid, modern laboratory accessories and libraries on par with Yangon and Mandalay universities: Senior general", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 10 November 2022; and "Pursue knowledge to continue studies on endless subjects", *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 17 December 2022.

⁹¹ Crisis Group interviews, women's rights activists, December 2022 and January 2023.

⁹² Crisis Group interview, women's rights activist, January 2023.

⁹³ "In turmoil, Myanmar families split over school", *Deutsche Welle*, 4 March 2022.

⁹⁴ See "Myanmar: Crisis taking an enormous toll on children, UN committee warns", UN Human Rights Office, 29 June 2022; and "Myanmar's desperate families are sending their children out to work", *Frontier Myanmar*, 14 November 2022.

⁹⁵ "Regressing Gender Equality in Myanmar: Women Living under the Pandemic and Military Rule", UN Women and UN Development Programme, March 2022.

Crackdowns and poverty have prompted many people, but primarily young adults, to seek to emigrate, through both formal and informal channels.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, applications to enter the military's elite Defence Services Academy have reportedly declined sharply since the coup.⁹⁷ All this evidence suggests that many young people see little future for themselves under direct or indirect military rule.

V. Changing the Political Culture

The 2021 coup has been a tragedy for the people of Myanmar, but it has also created an opportunity to chip away at gender and age hierarchies, making power structures more inclusive and equitable. In the months after the coup, young people and women pushed a progressive agenda, aspects of which are now enshrined in the NUG's Federal Democracy Charter. Two years on, women and youth remain integral to the anti-military movement, but the momentum in challenging age and gender norms appears to have stalled. Opposition forces, both political and military, have much work to do to bring greater inclusion to decision-making and give women and youth a more visible public role.

Inclusivity should be a goal in all resistance-led institutions formed since the coup, notably the NUG, the NUCC and state and regional consultative councils. As the most prominent, however, the NUG has a particularly important role to play in seeing this agenda through. While it is more inclusive than the ousted NLD government, women and youth remain underrepresented, and there is a widespread perception among its supporters that those who are involved have little authority. The NUG should endeavour to appoint more women and younger members, from a diversity of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, and elevate them to more senior roles – particularly those that traditionally have been a male domain. The NUCC will need to do even more to address its gender imbalance.

These steps alone will not be enough, though; without more substantive change, the NUG risks perpetuating the belief that appointments of women and youth are mere tokenism. Both it and the NUCC need to adopt internal policies that enable younger people and women to influence decision-making. They could both set age and gender quotas. The NUCC could introduce a regular rotation of leadership positions. The NUG, meanwhile, could ensure that women and younger members are encouraged to contribute at high-level internal meetings. More experienced NUG members could also take on formal mentoring roles for their younger counterparts.

This effort will require dedication, and it would benefit from closer cooperation with civil society and support from international technical advisers. Although senior members of both the NUG and NUCC have shown willingness to meet with women and youth movement figures – an improvement upon the NLD government – they do not appear to be taking the concerns of their interlocutors seriously, seemingly viewing

⁹⁶ In January, Myanmar closed its passport offices indefinitely, sowing panic and disrupting the plans of many seeking to emigrate abroad legally. "Thousands face a nervous wait as junta freezes passport renewals", *Frontier Myanmar*, 26 January 2023.

⁹⁷ "Applicants to Myanmar military academy dwindling, defecting officers say", *Myanmar Now*, 5 April 2022.

them as a low priority. Unless their attitude visibly changes, there is a risk that these new institutions will end up alienating some of their most important allies in the anti-military movement.

The Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs has been one of the more active NUG institutions, but it could still do more. Most of its public activities have focused on humanitarian aid distribution and awareness campaigns, such as the Sixteen Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence in late 2022. While such activities are welcome, it has a wider role to play in seeking to develop gender and youth-related policies, such as on sexual harassment, that apply across the NUG. It should also focus on amending discriminatory laws and introducing new legislation, such as the long-delayed law on preventing violence against women.⁹⁸ The NUG and its affiliates control only small parts of the country, but legislative change remains a powerful tool for changing public perceptions and attitudes.

What the military regime is doing on this front should spur the NUG to action: the junta is continuing to amend and enact laws, including on gender and youth-related issues. The regime has, for example, amended the Organisations Registration Law to restrict civil society (see Section IV.C), while recent changes to the National Education Law will make it more difficult to teach or use ethnic minority languages in the classroom. It has also said it will enact the Prevention of Violence against Women Law. The NUG can underscore its credentials by being a more competent law-drafting body that works for the benefit of all.

Women's involvement in armed conflict is a particularly difficult issue to navigate in Myanmar, as elsewhere, given the deeply ingrained perception that women should not be on the front line. Many women trained as combatants have themselves been socialised to believe that they are unfit for battle. But preventing women from taking on front-line duties in order to protect them, or because they are perceived as weak, perpetuates harmful gender norms. It also puts more pressure on male soldiers to live up to a masculinist warrior ideal, when some may be better suited to support roles. As a result, armed groups are not necessarily using their personnel in the most effective way. Keeping women away from the front lines also robs them of opportunities for advancement, leaving the leadership of armed groups predominantly male. While armed groups may have varying approaches to managing this issue – for example, by giving members more options in job assignments or by keeping the newest recruits off the front lines – they should, for a start, stop assigning combatants to particular roles on the basis of their gender.

Armed resistance groups also need to address the issue of sexual harassment before it becomes a more significant problem. Aside from the imperative to stop unacceptable behaviour toward women, failing to address the issue could cause serious damage to the opposition movement in a range of ways, from tarnishing its image, both domestically and internationally, to undermining support among women. The NUG's Ministry of Women, Youth and Children Affairs could play an important role

⁹⁸ The delay is reportedly due in part to policy disagreements between male bureaucrats (some of them former military officers) and gender rights experts, including over issues such as marital rape and physical abuse within marriages. See “‘Until her bones are broken’: Myanmar activists fight to outlaw domestic violence”, Reuters, 16 August 2019; and “As Myanmar democratizes, women's rights lag behind”, *The New York Times*, 16 May 2017.

in facilitating the development of anti-sexual harassment policies for PDFs that have claimed allegiance to it, conducting virtual or in-person training sessions, and putting in place a complaints mechanism it would administer. Armed groups that are independent of the NUG would not necessarily adhere to such a policy, but they might be open to cooperating with the NUG or civil society organisations on the issue.

Myanmar's independent media also has a role to play in dispelling gender stereotypes.⁹⁹ Focusing primarily on front-line fighting, as these media outlets now tend to do, reinforces the idea that men are leading the resistance, because they make up the bulk of soldiers. By broadening the focus of reporting to the many ways in which a range of people can and do contribute to the anti-military cause – as was more common in the early months after the coup – the media could better serve the cause of inclusivity, particularly when it comes to gender.

To help drive an inclusive agenda, international donors can, for their part, increase support to women and youth-led movements to strengthen their institutional capacity and expand their work in this area. Those groups have already been important conduits for aid to displaced people from both domestic and international sources, but they require core funding in addition to project-based support, and for activities beyond aid delivery. That may require injecting a dose of flexibility into their normal procedures. As many Myanmar civil society groups and NGOs are unregistered – especially those that have formed since the coup – they should in particular relax rules that require grantees to register, and those that regulate how funds are transferred, such as by allowing the use of informal mechanisms rather than banks.

Civil society organisations, meanwhile, should seek to expand their engagement with newly formed anti-military forces beyond humanitarian aid delivery into new areas, such as gender and human rights. Some of those now running anti-military forces, such as PDFs, have a civil society background and are likely to be open to discussions and training on these issues. Such engagement could have a positive impact not only on the armed groups' policies, but also on those of the new administrative bodies affiliated with them.

The harassment of women activists on social media, particularly by pro-military accounts, is a concerning development. Although intended to discredit the anti-military movement, it has a much wider chilling effect, largely because of the sexual nature of the attacks; women worry that they will become targets if they speak up against the regime. Telegram, in particular, has taken little action to rein in these pro-military actors, who have also caused real-world harm in other ways.¹⁰⁰ If Telegram does not start taking content moderation on its platform seriously, lawmakers and regulators in foreign jurisdictions should pressure it to do so: since the regime was banned from Facebook in February 2021, Telegram has become the primary social media platform

⁹⁹ Media freedom in Myanmar has declined precipitously since the coup. After rising up the Reporters Without Borders media freedom index to a peak of 131st in 2017, Myanmar fell to 176th of 180 countries in 2022. But despite the regime's efforts to suppress independent reporting, a number of outlets have managed to continue their work from exile or undercover inside the country.

¹⁰⁰ Telegram has rebuffed attempts by Myanmar digital rights activists to engage with it on the harm pro-military actors have inflicted using its platform. In March 2022, it did remove an influential pro-military account for violating rules on disseminating pornography, but a new account was reportedly set up within days. See "Telegram has a serious doxing problem", *Wired*, 20 September 2022. At press time, Telegram had not responded to Crisis Group's inquiries.

through which it spreads disinformation and hate. The NUG, which has so far said little about doxing, could help increase the pressure on Telegram by drawing attention to the problem, and possibly by introducing a policy of its own barring the practice.

VI. Conclusion

The February 2021 military coup has created new opportunities for women and younger people to wield political power. They have seized on a moment of disruption to push politics and society in a more progressive direction, challenging longstanding age and gender norms. Young people have created new political platforms through which to articulate their demands, and forced more established political leaders to not only engage with them, but also to adopt policies that reflect their wishes and demands.

Yet more needs to be done to consolidate initial gains. Despite widespread recognition of their ability, ingenuity and commitment to the cause, young people and women are still struggling to overcome patriarchal beliefs, even within the resistance, about gender roles and the definition of a capable leader. The NUG, the NUCC and ethnic armed groups need to pay greater attention to inclusion, while foreign actors should do whatever they can to encourage the nascent social changes, including by supporting women- and youth-led organisations.

Myanmar's present crisis looks set to be protracted and its outcome is uncertain, but changing age and gender norms within the resistance may well, over time, shape those in politics and society more broadly. Newly formed anti-military armed groups and political structures – as well as the country's long-established ethnic armed groups – have a significant amount of influence. Further, the political vision they are fighting for will continue to be salient in the years ahead; this will likely be the case even if the regime cracks down further. Nurturing a greater role for young people and women at this formative time could thus contribute to making Myanmar a more inclusive society, particularly when it comes to political leadership and opportunities, even amid an environment of deep uncertainty.

Melbourne/Yangon/Brussels, 16 February 2023

Appendix A: Map of Myanmar



International Crisis Group / KO / Dec 2015. Based on UN map no. 4168 Rev. 3 (June 2012).

Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 120 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries or regions at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international, regional and national decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a monthly early-warning bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in up to 80 situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on its website, www.crisisgroup.org. Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board of Trustees – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policymakers around the world. Crisis Group is co-chaired by President & CEO of the Fiore Group and Founder of the Radcliffe Foundation, Frank Giustra, as well as by former Foreign Minister of Argentina and Chef de Cabinet to the United Nations Secretary-General, Susana Malcorra.

Comfort Ero was appointed Crisis Group's President & CEO in December 2021. She first joined Crisis Group as West Africa Project Director in 2001 and later rose to become Africa Program Director in 2011 and then Interim Vice President. In between her two tenures at Crisis Group, she worked for the International Centre for Transitional Justice and the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General in Liberia.

Crisis Group's international headquarters is in Brussels, and the organisation has offices in seven other locations: Bogotá, Dakar, Istanbul, Nairobi, London, New York, and Washington, DC. It has presences in the following locations: Abuja, Addis Ababa, Bahrain, Baku, Bangkok, Beirut, Caracas, Gaza City, Guatemala City, Jerusalem, Johannesburg, Juba, Kabul, Kiev, Manila, Mexico City, Moscow, Seoul, Tbilisi, Toronto, Tripoli, Tunis, and Yangon.

Crisis Group receives financial support from a wide range of governments, foundations, and private sources. The ideas, opinions and comments expressed by Crisis Group are entirely its own and do not represent or reflect the views of any donor. Currently Crisis Group holds relationships with the following governmental departments and agencies: Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Austrian Development Agency, Canadian Department of National Defence, Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, European Union Instrument contributing to Stability and Peace, Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, French Development Agency, French Ministry of Europe and Foreign Affairs, Global Affairs Canada, Irish Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan International Cooperation Agency, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Principality of Liechtenstein, Luxembourg Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Qatar Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Swiss Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, United Arab Emirates (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation and Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy), United Nations Development Programme, United Nations World Food Programme, UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and the World Bank.

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February 2023

Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on Asia since 2020

Special Reports and Briefings

COVID-19 and Conflict: Seven Trends to Watch, Special Briefing N°4, 24 March 2020 (also available in French and Spanish).

A Course Correction for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, Special Briefing N°5, 9 December 2020.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2021-2022, Special Briefing N°6, 13 September 2021.

7 Priorities for the G7: Managing the Global Fallout of Russia's War on Ukraine, Special Briefing N°7, 22 June 2022.

Ten Challenges for the UN in 2022-2023, Special Briefing N°8, 14 September 2022.

Seven Priorities for Preserving the OSCE in a Time of War, Special Briefing N°9, 29 November 2022.

North East Asia

Risky Competition: Strengthening U.S.-China Crisis Management, Asia Report N°324, 20 May 2022.

South Asia

Twelve Ideas to Make Intra-Afghan Negotiations Work, Asia Briefing N°160, 2 March 2020.

Raising the Stakes in Jammu and Kashmir, Asia Report N°310, 5 August 2020.

Pakistan's COVID-19 Crisis, Asia Briefing N°162, 7 August 2020.

Taking Stock of the Taliban's Perspectives on Peace, Asia Report N°311, 11 August 2020.

What Future for Afghan Peace Talks under a Biden Administration?, Asia Briefing N°165, 13 January 2021.

Pakistan: Shoring Up Afghanistan's Peace Process, Asia Briefing N°169, 30 June 2021.

Beyond Emergency Relief: Averting Afghanistan's Humanitarian Catastrophe, Asia Report N°317, 6 December 2021.

Pakistan's Hard Policy Choices in Afghanistan, Asia Report N°320, 4 February 2022.

Women and Peacebuilding in Pakistan's North West, Asia Report N°321, 14 February 2022.

Afghanistan's Security Challenges under the Taliban, Asia Report N°326, 12 August 2022 (also available in Dari and Pashto).

A New Era of Sectarian Violence in Pakistan, Asia Report N°327, 5 September 2022.

South East Asia

Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue: Giving Substance to Form, Asia Report N°304, 21 January 2020 (also available in Malay and Thai).

Commerce and Conflict: Navigating Myanmar's China Relationship, Asia Report N°305, 30 March 2020.

Southern Philippines: Tackling Clan Politics in the Bangsamoro, Asia Report N°306, 14 April 2020.

Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar, Asia Briefing N°161, 19 May 2020.

An Avoidable War: Politics and Armed Conflict in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Report N°307, 9 June 2020.

Rebooting Myanmar's Stalled Peace Process, Asia Report N°308, 19 June 2020.

COVID-19 and a Possible Political Reckoning in Thailand, Asia Report N°309, 4 August 2020.

Identity Crisis: Ethnicity and Conflict in Myanmar, Asia Report N°312, 28 August 2020.

Majority Rules in Myanmar's Second Democratic Election, Asia Briefing N°163, 22 October 2020 (also available in Burmese).

From Elections to Ceasefire in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Briefing N°164, 23 December 2020.

Responding to the Myanmar Coup, Asia Briefing N°166, 16 February 2021.

The Cost of the Coup: Myanmar Edges Toward State Collapse, Asia Briefing N°167, 1 April 2021.

Southern Philippines: Keeping Normalisation on Track in the Bangsamoro, Asia Report N°313, 15 April 2021.

Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield, Asia Report N°314, 18 May 2021.

Taking Aim at the Tatmadaw: The New Armed Resistance to Myanmar's Coup, Asia Briefing N°168, 28 June 2021.

Competing Visions of International Order in the South China Sea, Asia Report N°315, 29 November 2021.

The Philippines' Dilemma: How to Manage Tensions in the South China Sea, Asia Report N°316, 2 December 2021.

Vietnam Tacks Between Cooperation and Struggle in the South China Sea, Asia Report N°318, 7 December 2021.

Myanmar's Coup Shakes Up Its Ethnic Conflicts, Asia Report N°319, 12 January 2022.

Southern Philippines: Fostering an Inclusive Bangsamoro, Asia Report N°322, 18 February 2022.

Addressing Islamist Militancy in the Southern Philippines, Asia Report N°323, 18 March 2022.

Resisting the Resistance: Myanmar's Pro-Military Pyusawhti Militias, Asia Briefing N°171, 6 April 2022.

Sustaining the Momentum in Southern Thailand's Peace Dialogue, Asia Briefing N°172, 19 April 2022.

Avoiding a Return to War in Myanmar's Rakhine State, Asia Report N°325, 1 June 2022.

Coming to Terms with Myanmar's Russia Embrace, Asia Briefing N°173, 4 August 2022.

Crowdfunding a War: The Money behind Myanmar's Resistance, Asia Report N°328, 20 December 2022.



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