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**How nonviolent resistance is framed on Facebook.  
The case of the Kachin Youth Movement in  
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Hkalen Tu Hkawng,  
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# How nonviolent resistance is framed on Facebook. The case of the Kachin Youth Movement in April–May 2018 in its context of Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism

Bernhard Ortman, Hkalen Tu Hkawng,  
D Moon Awng, Dabang Kai Htang

## 1 Introduction

How can a nonviolent protest movement win? Since February 2021, this is arguably one of the most-discussed questions in Myanmar. To add to the discussion, this article examines the successful case of the nonviolent protests in April and May 2018 in Myitkyina which were led by the Kachin Youth Movement (KYM). Around 29 April 2018, the KYM had successfully started to mobilize people in Myitkyina to call for the release of displaced civilians trapped in a conflict zone in Tanai Township. The displacement of civilians had been a result of a series of offensives against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) that the Myanmar military, or Tatmadaw, had begun to launch in January 2018<sup>1</sup>. After days of peaceful demonstrations with

activities centering around Manau park and intense negotiations with the government, the protests ended on 9 May when the last internally displaced persons (IDPs) from Lainawng Hku village had been rescued. Looking back at the protests, one key informant said that this was the «first time of a demonstration [in Kachin state] that can be considered a big one.» The size of the protests is even more surprising since the idea of nonviolent resistance, according to the same informant, was largely foreign to Kachin society at the time. When asked to explain how the KYM had mobilized that many people, the informant pointed to one major factor that, s/he estimated, was responsible for 80% of the success: Facebook<sup>2</sup>.

The importance of Facebook as the main vehicle for internet users in Myanmar is well known<sup>3</sup>. It is, therefore, not

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1 *Lawi Weng, KIA Reports Second Offensive by Tatmadaw This Year*, in: The Irrawaddy, 08.03.2018, <<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/kia-reports-second-offensive-tatmadaw-year.html>>, (accessed on 08.11.2020).

2 Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

3 Gerard McCarthy, Cyber-spaces, in: Routledge handbook of contemporary Myanmar, ed. by Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday, London, New York: Routledge, 2018, 92–105: 94; Lori an Leong, Domesticating algorithms. An exploratory study of Facebook users in Myanmar, in: The Information Society 36(2) (2020), 97–108.

surprising that Facebook is also becoming more and more important for social movements in Myanmar. As McCarthy puts it, «the trans-local exposure offered by Facebook is increasingly inspiring citizen social action, reformulating civil-military relations and playing an essential role in defining parameters of the national political community<sup>4</sup>. “ In the case of the youth-led protests in Myitkyina in 2018 this also has to be seen in light of the fact that the youth in Myanmar often has to rely on informal social networks, both offline and online, to influence decision makers. For the youth is given little opportunity to engage in the political landscape of Myanmar, as for instance Grizelj has pointed out regarding the formal peace process<sup>5</sup>.

Consequently, looking at the success of the protests in Myitkyina, the question emerges how the KYM as a movement revolving around peace and nonviolence successfully navigated the online sphere and how its nonviolent approach found its expression on Facebook. Therefore, this qualitative study aims at a detailed understanding of how the nonviolent approach of the KYM was framed on the Facebook page that the leaders of the movement created to represent the KYM online. Therefore, on the

one hand, the following analysis focuses on framings of nonviolence in the posts of the leaders of the KYM. On the other hand, it also takes into account framings of nonviolence found in the comments that the wider public left on the Facebook page of the movement. ‘Framing’ here is understood as the major themes that accompany references to nonviolence (and to violence as its counterpart) on the Facebook page of the KYM. Regarding the comments on Facebook, it was further investigated if they were supportive of or in opposition to the nonviolent approach of the KYM.

A further objective of this study was to understand how the nonviolent approach of the KYM was framed in religious terms. This seemed important since Christianity over the past decades has become one of the most prominent markers of Kachin identity. It was therefore anticipated to find framings of nonviolence during data analysis that had links to elements of Christian belief and practice. In fact, Walton states that Christian framings of ethno-nationalist identities have been influential «in developing a distinct sense of nation-hood» also in the nation-building attempts of other non-Bamar ethnic groups with sizable Christian communities, such

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5 Irena Grizelj, Engaging the next generation: A field perspective of youth inclusion in Myanmar’s peace negotiations, in: *International Negotiation* 24(1) (2019), 164–188: 169.

as the Chin and the Karen<sup>6</sup>. Concerning the Kachin, Sadan has shown that Christianity had reached its importance in Kachin society only after the emergence of armed resistance in 1961 and that it had established close links to Kachin ethno-nationalism in the decades that followed<sup>7</sup>. Kiik has further pointed out that, in Kachin Christianity, there is a strong emphasis on the perceived discrimination of the Kachi by the Bamar Buddhist population and on the ongoing experience of state

aggression and military violence. According to him, this also includes the understanding that God would eventually liberate the Kachin like God liberated the Israelites in Ancient

Egypt according to the Exodus narrative in the Hebrew bible<sup>8</sup>. Therefore, one additional research question guiding the current study was what role Christianity played in framings of the nonviolent approach of the KYM, particularly concerning the role of Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism in supporting or opposing the idea of nonviolent resistance.

## 2 Methodology

This qualitative study employed the approach of thematic analysis to identify major themes in posts and comments on the Facebook page of the KYM<sup>9</sup>. To reach a deeper understanding of the context and the inner workings of the KYM, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three key informants.

The collection of Facebook data was first conducted using fanpagekarma.com: all 290 posts that the KYM made on its Facebook page within the timeframe of 29 April to 18 May 2018 were extracted, thus starting with the beginning of the protests and ending at the time when the number of posts had declined significantly.

As a first step of analysis, Structural coding was conducted for all extracted posts in their original language (Jinghpaw, Burmese and English).<sup>10</sup> This meant coding the posts in terms of their relevance regarding research questions focusing on the framings of nonviolence and

6 Matthew J. Walton, Nation-building, in: *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*, ed. by Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday, London, New York: Routledge, 2018, 393–403: 398.

7 Mandy Sadan, *Being and becomin Kachin. Histories beyond the state in the border worlds of Burma*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 323f., 372f.

8 Laur Kiik, Conspiracy, God's plan, and national emergency: Kachin popular analyses of the ceasefire era and its resource grabs, in: *War and peace in the borderlands of Myanmar. The Kachin ceasefire, 1994–2011*, ed. by Mandy Sadan, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2016, 205–235: 232f.

9 For security reasons, neither references to Facebook data nor the names of the key informants are provided here.

10 Johnny Saldaña, *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*, Los Angeles et al.: Sage, 2015, 84–87.

violence. Nonviolence and violence were conceptualized broadly to include most of their manifestations.<sup>11</sup> Those Jinghpaw and Burmese posts that had been coded during Structural coding were subsequently translated into English. In what followed, Descriptive coding, i.e. coding for basic themes, and the development of broader overarching themes were conducted for all English posts (translated as well as original ones).<sup>12</sup>

To reduce the number of comments to be analyzed, only those comments were included whose posts had been coded with a Structural code and had received a number of reactions that was above the mean value in at least one of the following categories retrieved from fanpagekarma.com: «primary comments», «secondary comments», «angry», «likes», «sad», «wow», «love», «haha», «shares», «total reactions, comments, shares». The resulting number of 8586 comments was retrieved from the included posts using exportcomments.com.

Comments in Jinghpaw and

Burmese were again pre-selected for translation according to their relevance regarding the research questions, again focusing on framings of nonviolence and violence as well as on signs of support or opposition to nonviolence. Structural and Descriptive coding as well as the development of themes were conducted accordingly for the resulting number of 968 English comments (translated and original ones).

In terms of the limitations of the current study, it can be argued that its focus on the Facebook page of the KYM, which was set up and run by its leaders, puts a one-sided emphasis on their perspective. The main problem with this is, as Tsatsou emphasizes, that social movements which rely on Facebook as a primary medium of communication are characterized by a complex picture of leadership, since anyone who is able to communicate effectively on Facebook can become a thought leader.<sup>13</sup> One way of dealing with this limitation has been to also include the perspectives of commenters. Furthermore, it is likely that that the Facebook page of the KYM,

11 Cf. Thorsten Bonacker & Peter Imbusch, *Zentrale Begriffe der Friedens- und Konfliktforschung: Konflikt, Gewalt, Krieg, Frieden*, in: *Friedens- und Konfliktforschung. Eine Einführung*, ed. by Peter Imbusch and Ralf Zoll, Wiesbaden: VS Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften, 2010, 67–142: 86–90; Johan Galtung, *Violence, peace, and peace research*, in: *Journal of peace research* 6(3) (1969), 167–191; Martin Parker, Valérie Fournier & Patrick Reedy (Eds.), *Non-violent resistance*, in: *Dictionary of alternatives. Utopianism and organization*, London, New York: Zed Books, 2007, 198f.

12 Saldaña, *Coding*, 87–91.

13 Panayiota Tsatsou, *Social media and informal organisation of citizen activism: Lessons from the use of Facebook in the sunflower movement*, in: *Social media + society* 4(1) (2018), 1–12: 4f., 10.



as its most important hub for exchanging information, was a space in which a variety of viewpoints were expressed, both from within and outside the movement.

### **3 Framings of nonviolence in posts and comments on the Facebook page of the KYM**

#### **3.1 *A humanitarian purpose***

In a speech that was recorded and posted on the Facebook page of the KYM at an early stage of the protests, the purpose of the protests was described as twofold: «The first demand is to be able to rescue the IDPs from the war zone to a safe place immediately.

After reaching safe areas, the civilians must be provided humanitarian aid as our second purpose.» In one of the key informant interviews, the purpose of the KYM was narrowed down to a simple humanitarian act: «It was a movement that saved people lives.»<sup>14</sup> The KYM echoed this humanitarian framing of its purpose in its posts on its Facebook page, either in much the same way or with slight variations: «Their protest purpose is none other at all. It's a call to free the trapped displaced people.»

This purpose of the KYM was also expressed by many posts portraying the plight of the IDPs, often aided by pictures and video recordings. Accordingly, a dominant theme running through these posts was that a high number of IDPs needed help from external actors to be rescued from their dangerous conditions in the war zone in which they were «trapped». In addition to the dangers of ongoing armed conflict, the KYM posts commonly pointed to the IDPs' lacking of proper food, shelter and medicine as well as their strenuous living conditions during their long treks through the jungle. In some posts the KYM concretized the impersonal mass of IDPs by highlighting pregnant women, children and old people as suffering especially under these circumstances. Another way of expressing the basic purpose of the KYM was to post or share pictures of supporters holding simple handwritten banners with variations of «Free IDPs» written on them into the

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14 Conducted in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

camera. This, of course, also emphasized the solidarity of the people with the IDPs and the KYM. Another aspect expressed on some of these banners was the armed conflict in Kachin state in general. Such banners read e.g.: «Stop the war in Kachin» or «Stop bombing Kachin state».

This wider focus on the consequences of war was also an important part of the leaders' understanding of the KYM. Flowing out of its humanitarian purpose came the conviction that the KYM had to be a «peace movement», as one key informant described it.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, the emphasis of the KYM on nonviolence can be understood as being based on a humanitarian purpose which found expression in its emphasis on peace over against the violent consequences of civil war that the IDPs were suffering. In the following statement, another key informant explicitly connected the humanitarian aspect, the peace aspect and the nonviolence aspect: «Since we were leading a movement that saved people's lives, opposed the civil war and supported non-violence, we objected to any violent actions and would not practice violence.»<sup>16</sup> Slogans found in some of the KYM posts express the connection between these three aspects in a similar way, e.g.: «We are young and active... We stand on nonviolence. We stand on peace.

No War No Conflict». Hence, the idea of nonviolence in the KYM can be understood as having been rooted in the understanding that the very purpose of this movement was to oppose the violence that the civilians of Kachin state experienced due to ongoing civil war.

This framing in terms of a humanitarian purpose was also reflected in the comments on the Facebook page of the KYM. Commenters generally acknowledged the character of the KYM as a nonviolent humanitarian movement by pointing out that, at its core, the movement was not about politics but about «calling to rescue the trapped citizens». Some commenters also explicitly appreciated the nonviolent approach of the KYM in relation to its humanitarian cause, for instance: «Many nonviolent protests must be held to save the IDPs who are trapped because of war. What you are doing is very good.»

The opposition of the KYM to violence was also connected to the idea of a fight for basic human rights. In the posts on the Facebook page of the KYM this aspect seems to have been stressed especially by religious leaders. In one speech, a prominent church leader summed up the nonviolent approach of the KYM as

<sup>15</sup> Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

<sup>16</sup> Interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

follows: «Involving in this movement is not about politics and not going against the government and military but about working for the cause of human rights». Highlighting the situation of the IDPs as a human rights issue and the KYM as fighting for basic justice and the rule of law grounded the KYM in democratic values.<sup>17</sup> The protesters took this understanding to the streets by shouting the slogan «No more human rights violation!» answered by «No violation!» during a march in downtown Myitkyina. In several of the Facebook posts of the KYM, the focus on human rights was further connected to the idea that even though the KYM was not able to «evacuate them [the IDPs] physically», they were «exposing the news to the world», as one pastor put it. Thus, the KYM positioned itself as part of a global movement for justice, which, it can be assumed, also served to increase its credibility among local people. In much the same way, the emphasis of the KYM on nonviolence was linked to the idea that a nonviolent approach made the KYM part of a line of political protests that are generally looked upon favorably. This was not only pointed out in one key informant interview;<sup>18</sup> also one pastor expressed this idea in a roadside speech recorded

on Facebook: «This is related to the whole Myanmar nation. This is for justice. And it is what the world wants. People from the rest of the world are fighting for their own justice. Let's continue to carry out the mission and sacrifice ourselves. Then we will gain victory.»

### **3.2 Constructive dialogue**

One key informant defined the KYM's understanding of nonviolence to mean that they were acting for change without resorting to any violence. If their movement was to be nonviolent, s/he went on, it also had to be a «peace movement» and rely on «constructive dialogue» with the government as its strategy.<sup>19</sup> According to this key informant, this understanding had been formed as early as 5 April 2018 when representatives of the emerging KYM met with the Union Minister of Social Welfare, Relief and Resettlement, Win Myat Aye, at Nan Thida hotel in Myitkyina to «negotiate about the trapped IDPs».<sup>20</sup> Also a month later, on 3 May, the term «constructive dialogue» was used by a prominent church leader to frame the talks about the IDP issue between the chief minister of Kachin state, Khet Aung, and representatives of

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17 On the framing as a democratic movement, see chapter 3.3.

18 Conducted in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

19 On the framing as a peace movement, see chapter 3.1.

20 Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

the youth, the Peace-Talk Creation Group, religious leaders from the Myitkyina Council of Churches, and community leaders. On occasion of these talks, a representative of the KYM explained to the public: «So selected and respected leaders and religious leaders are planning to meet with the officials. We are having a peaceful discussion. We are not going because the government threatens and devalues us. We will have a discussion with the government with a firm set of values and a humble attitude.»

The remark «We are not going because the government threatens and devalues us» can be interpreted as a defensive statement that needed to be made to ensure that the people did not misinterpret the KYM's strategy of constructive dialogue as a weakness. It can be assumed that this was necessary because, as stated by one of the key informants, at the time, nonviolent resistance was a rather foreign idea in Kachin society, also among the youth. In the same key informant interview it was pointed out that violence as a means of dealing with conflict was «instilled in the mindset of the youth» and that in 2011, when the Kachin ceasefire broke down, also parts of the youth in the churches were «quite motivated to use violence and encourage others to act in those ways.»

The leaders of the KYM, in contrast, were «trying to erase those mindsets» among the youth, the key informant argued.<sup>21</sup> While the leaders agreed on sticking to nonviolence, the history of violence in Kachin state had its effects on the wider KYM: there were tensions between those participants that were convinced of nonviolence and those that were «very motivated and urged to attack or express physical violence against the government», as another key informant revealed. S/he, in fact, stated that «there were nearly two youth groups in the movement».<sup>22</sup> This was also confirmed by the third key informant.<sup>23</sup>

The appeal of violence is also evident in the Facebook comments. While the majority of comments support the nonviolent approach of the KYM, the content of those comments that directly oppose this approach and argue for the use of violence is nevertheless revealing: most are either directed against the government, the police, the Tatmadaw, “the Burmese” or a combination of these. When referring to the government, commenters used terms like «dictatorship» and «military government». In terms of the government, comments advocating violence criticized the law in Myanmar to be «evasive» and to be used to put «innocent citizens [...] into cells». Moreover, commenters accused

21 Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

22 Interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020

23 Interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020

the military to «rob and tyrannize citizens»; lamented its «killing, raping and robbing and hiding»; and stated that the «people [including the KYM] are just being bullied and played by the Myanmar Army». Calls of commenters for violent action mainly focused on Burmese people in general and included prompts in abusive language to beat and kill «the Burmese». Sometimes, commenters used drastic expressions, like «Fight! Fight! These Burmese are too much. Should cut their heads off.» References to Kachin identity – and, once, to the KIA – were also made when stating: «Youth! Beat and kill all. The Burmese soldiers cannot be handled with words. They must be shot and killed with guns. So, just go to the Kachin Independence Army.»

It must be seen against this backdrop when leaders as well as participants of the KYM emphasized in interviews and speeches that the movement was not revolutionary, meaning that it did not aim at overthrowing the government. Thus, by framing its approach in terms of a constructive dialogue, the KYM also distanced itself from a revolutionary approach that could associate it with the KIA and with Myanmar's numerous other EAOs in general. Creating this distance became all the more important since «military lobbyists», as one key informant described them, tried to discredit the

KYM on Facebook: in their messages they claimed that the KYM was in fact working on behalf of the KIA; they went as far as posting fake photographs, e.g. a picture of a representative of the KYM together with the KIA General Sumlut Gun Maw.<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, comments accusing protesters of being «rebels in disguise» are numerous on the Facebook page of the KYM. These comments interpreted the protests of the KYM as a tactic to divert attention from the KIA and make time for the KIA to retreat and regroup when it was put under pressure by the Myanmar military. Another issue that such comments raised was the question why the KYM was protesting only now and not «when the rebels kill». This kind of criticism was also framed in religious terms, when a commenter asked how it could be that «your Jesus» was opposed to the killing of innocent civilians while the KIA, according to the commenter, was doing that very thing.

Even though one key informant argued that such efforts to discredit the KYM did not have a major effect on the movement, they made it even more necessary for the KYM to stress its democratic convictions.<sup>25</sup> One of the ways in which the KYM could show its dedication to work with the government

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24 Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

25 Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020. On the framing as a democratic movement, see chapter 3.3.

in a constructive manner was to keep the protests within the boundaries of the law as much as possible.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, whenever the government became unresponsive, the KYM increased the pressure on the government by resorting to more drastic acts of nonviolent resistance. For instance, on 3 May, representatives of the KYM explained during a live stream on Facebook that they were not willing to fulfill the demand of the government to meet for a sixth time for negotiations, even though the government had declared their protests to be unlawful. On the next day, when the government eventually had failed to include the demanded promise to rescue the IDPs in an official statement, one of the KYM representatives explained: «We gathered our people within a night and there are 1500 youth and the supporters are around 500». Thus, the KYM used a deliberate «strategy of putting pressure on the police».<sup>27</sup>

New strategies of nonviolent resistance were also suggested in the comments on the Facebook page of the KYM. One commenter proposed to specifically target the chief minister of Kachin state with the protests: «Must demonstrate in front of Khet Aung's office». In another comment, it was suggested to closely monitor and record the activities of the police. The power of civil disobedience was also alluded to: «These Burmese

police are too much. When they charge and arrest the leaders, go to the station and say 'arrest all of us too'. Only then, the world will take action against them.» In addition to such practical suggestions, also the KYM's deliberate use of constructive dialogue found support among commenters. There were those that explicitly encouraged this, e.g. by urging the activists to «negotiate with a polite method and gain victory». Another commenter defended the dialogical approach by explaining to other commenters that, with this approach, progress would naturally tend to be slow.

The approach of constructive dialogue notwithstanding, when the protests were over, there were 41 activists who had been sued in 13 cases nationwide. Of those cases, two were in Kachin state while most others were related to protests held in solidarity in Yangon. The risk of legal actions being taken against the protesters thus existed constantly and was expressed in various posts of the KYM. In a particularly revealing live stream, one youth expressed the growing sense of risk thus: «Now one of the police officers is taking a photo of me. They are here maybe to arrest or use force against us. A lot of police here.» On the Facebook page of the KYM, the risk of legal consequences as well as the risk of clashes with the police was expressed most clearly by many uploaded pictures of the police, some of the pictures

<sup>26</sup> Key informant interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

<sup>27</sup> Key informant interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

showing groups of police officers prepared with weapons and shields. In the context of Myanmar, the sight of armed police side by side with young protesters, of course, reminded of violent crackdowns of the past, most prominently during the student protests in 1988 and the so-called Saffron Revolution of 2007. Indeed, based on this violent history, the leaders of the KYM from the very beginning had anticipated violent clashes with security forces. According to one key informant, there were rumors that the same military troops that killed protesters in 1988 had been deployed to Myitkyina.<sup>28</sup> Consequently, according to another key informant, the leaders of the KYM agreed from the very beginning that avoiding similar events would be a «key factor» of «first priority».<sup>29</sup> Hence, a large part of the rationale behind the choice of a nonviolent approach must be seen against the backdrop of such risk-related considerations.

### **3.3 Democratic representation**

As contested as the nonviolent approach of the KYM may have been among the participants (see chapter 3.2), the leaders kept on following their strategy of constructive dialogue with the government throughout the protests. This strategy was

closely linked to the understanding that the KYM was a people's movement that represented the interests of the citizens over against the government. This framing of the nonviolent approach of the KYM was used in various speeches and interviews with leading activists that can be found on Facebook. One representative of the KYM expressed this pointedly when he stated in a speech on the occasion of the meeting between the KYM and the chief minister of Kachin state: «We demand the government who claims it stands with the citizens to come down to where there are citizens and have a discussion.» In one key informant interview, the KYM was defined as a «Kachin national democratic movement» and it was stressed that despite its name the KYM was «not just about youth». According to this key informant, all kinds of people participated in the movement so that there was «no owner». This, s/he went on, could also be seen in the fact that many local people supported the KYM, like «mother groups», shop owners and restaurant owners, who provided food for the participants of the protests.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, a leading member of the KYM pointed out in an interview posted on Facebook that the KYM was stepping in to remind the government that it was the government's «duty» to «save» the IDPs,

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28 Interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

29 Interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

30 Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

«if the government sympathizes with and cares for its ethnic people». This statement reveals the important fact that the KYM felt the need to speak out on behalf of the IDPs because the KYM did not see the government fulfilling its duty.

The resulting disappointment with the government and, consequently, the feeling of not being adequately represented by it is a theme that can also be identified in the comments on the Facebook page of the KYM. Many commenters expressed that the Kachin had «no government to trust and rely on». This was often explained by pointing to the influence of the military on the government. Another related topic that was often touched upon in the comments are grievances related to the rule of law. One commenter expressed it succinctly: «Your law is killing the citizens. Fuck!»

Such comments as well as statements made by leading activists of the KYM connected the situation of the IDPs, sometimes explicitly, to the grievances of non-Bamar ethnic groups in Myanmar in general. Here, the KYM, in line with its democratic nature, self-identified as a movement that ultimately was not only concerned with the Kachin IDPs but with the whole of Myanmar, even though the suffering of the IDPs clearly was the main theme behind the protests. This underlying national orientation was expressed in speeches recorded on the Facebook page

of the KYM, e.g. when a protester asked the chief minister of Kachin state to come out for a discussion by stating: «We are sacrificing our lives and blood for the union of Myanmar. [...] We are proving how much we love the union of Myanmar.»

This national outlook, it seems, also came about because the KYM had to rely on broader political structures in its dialogue with the government. Already at the local level, representing the citizens meant that the KYM had to respect established structures of leadership. This partly explains why the KYM not only engaged with the government but also worked together closely with community leaders and religious leaders. Concerning the national level, the KYM posts reveal that the activists in Myitkyina appealed to various government bodies by sending letters; they also approached the chief minister of Kachin state as someone who, they hoped, could elevate their cause to a national concern.

It is likely that the cause of the KYM resonated with various groups in other parts of Myanmar also because the KYM framed its nonviolent resistance in terms of a constructive dialogue with the government and emphasized its national outlook: many posts on the Facebook page of the KYM are shared posts from other people, from individuals to youth groups to NGOs, who expressed their solidarity with



the KYM in the form of personal narratives, pictures of handwritten slogans like «Free IDPs», official statements etc. Of course, resonance was especially strong among Kachin communities living in other parts of the country who went beyond the virtual engagement on Facebook and organized protests in their own respective places. However, this not only happened among the Kachin: youths from other ethnic groups, like the Kayah, also travelled to Myitkyina to participate in the protests themselves and donated money to the KYM.

In a speech posted on the Facebook page of the KYM that was given during a meeting of representatives of various women organizations, the solidarity shown among the youth groups of different ethnicity was interpreted as a display of unity. The speaker encouraged this development by stating that «We all are from the same blood» and, interestingly, connected this to the nonviolent character of the movement by saying: «Let us achieve our goal with the approach of nonviolence». Thus, it seems, the nonviolent approach of the KYM in conjunction with its democratic moorings helped to create a space that allowed for diversity so that different ethnic groups could participate, get more information about the IDP issue, and express their views on it. This, in turn, furthered the democratic character of the

movement since it allowed for a more varied, even nationwide, representation of voices on the issue.

### **3.4 Christianity**

While Facebook played an important role in mobilizing people for the cause of the KYM, this only worked once the movement had gained some momentum. In the beginning, it was mainly through church networks that people were mobilized. This was partly because the reach of Facebook depended on access to the internet, which, while being available in Myitkyina district, could not be accessed easily in the more remote parts of the other districts of Kachin state. Since church networks were able to bridge these digital gaps, the KYM in the beginning turned to the churches as their main channel for informing the public about their cause.<sup>31</sup> Umbrella organizations that gather religious leaders from different denominations played a crucial role in making religious leaders come out to back the KYM and involve in the protests themselves. According to one key informant, about 60% of youth participants joined the KYM because of the support of the religious leaders of their respective denominations.<sup>32</sup> Another key informant pointed out further that the influence of the churches on the parents was an important factor in mobilizing supporters since

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31 Key informant interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020

32 Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

«most parents rarely disapprove of the activities that the churches support». This was especially beneficial for a movement like the KYM because, as the key informant explained, there were «parents who still lack knowledge about politics» and «rather than thinking about the political situation themselves, they accept it when the individuals or groups they believe in are supportive». However, despite the important role of church networks that key informants stressed especially regarding the beginning of the protests, the role of churches should not be overemphasized. This was pointed out particularly by the third key informant, who argued that in the very beginning the churches, including the KBC, were reluctant to support the KYM.<sup>33</sup> Echoes of tensions between churches and the KYM could also be heard in another key informant interview: it was important to the informant to clarify that, even though churches were an important part of the movement, they never exercised control over the KYM.<sup>34</sup>

Even if the churches did not control the KYM much, there are signs of a strong general Christian influence on the KYM. On Facebook, the importance of Christianity is probably expressed most clearly in the numerous posts and comments on the topic of prayer. A common thread running through these prayer-related messages are

the topics of solidarity and unity. The KYM presented prayer as a form of solidarity to be shown by «ethnic people and youth from Myanmar and around the world» and requested people to pray not only for its own activities but also for the IDPs. In addition to text posts of the KYM, such prayer requests were made by religious leaders but also by lay people whose speeches and interviews were live streamed or recorded and posted on Facebook.

In addition to prayer requests on Facebook, the KYM organized religious activities, like «praise and worship» meetings that the youths were familiar with from «church camps».<sup>35</sup> These gatherings were combined with performances of musicians or dancers as well as with more mundane matters like press conferences. On the one hand, these religious activities seem to have acted to gather the youth around a shared familiar practice. On the other hand, they naturally offered a platform for the religious leaders to address and influence the participants with speeches, sermons, and prayers. Among such religious activities were also those that displayed a special emphasis on the uniting aspect of prayer. In one case, the KYM employed particularly evocative symbols to emphasize the aspect of unity in prayer: it organized a large prayer meeting in which it asked the participants to write

33 Interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

34 Interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

35 Key informant interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

their prayers on white balloons and let them fly into the sky all at once. This highly symbolic act was recorded on video and posted on the Facebook page of the KYM. Another way of using symbolic language to emphasize the uniting aspect of prayer on the Facebook page of the KYM was to post pictures of groups of people in prayer, kneeling shoulder to shoulder at roadsides, sitting in circles with candles in their hands, keeping their hands folded, eyes shut, and heads bowed. These pictures, too, can be interpreted as powerful representations of the unity that the practice of prayer enabled within the movement.

A further aspect related to the topic of prayer on the Facebook page of the KYM is the elevated sense of participation that prayer was able to generate among the participants. Prayer enabled the participants of the protests, for example, to lend spiritual support to frontline activists who were involved in high-level negotiations with government representatives like Khet Aung. This sense of participation was encouraged, for instance, by a prominent church leader who took part in such negotiations and asked the other participants to «stand here and pray for us» while he and other KYM representatives were going to discuss with Khet Aung. This understanding of prayer allowed the participants to have a sense of direct participation, both the masses who could not participate in high-level meetings

as well as those supporters who could not participate in person at all and were following the events in Myitkyina online on Facebook. Additionally, when focusing their prayers on the IDPs, the practice of prayer enabled the KYM to maintain a sense of connectedness with the ones who they were fighting for.

When analyzing the prayers and prayer requests found on Facebook, it is important to understand that they were based on the belief that the cause of the KYM to «save IDPs» was in line with God's purposes. Various pastors expressed that the KYM was «part of the mission of God [...] to go against the acts of evil» and that the KYM was doing what Jesus demanded. This was linked to the idea that those who participated in the protests would «be blessed from God». Such notions were also conveyed in prayers which thus implicitly could amount to powerful calls for participation, like the following prayer of a pastor:

Bless the youth who are here with us. And be a light in the youth who are not here with us. Light their mind to be here fighting for our peoples' freedom as this is a process of making our own history. We kneel in front of you because we don't want to kneel before men.

Occasionally, these ideas were framed using imagery from the Hebrew

bible, depicting the Kachin as equivalent to the Israelites and equating the Myanmar government and military with the hostile peoples surrounding the Israelites. In some cases, this culminated in the claim that Kachin state was «the land given to our ancestors by God». The following exemplary prayer combined the idea of an identification of the Kachin with the Israelites as the people of God and the notion that Kachin state represented the 'promised land' from which the Kachin were being expelled: «We are the people you love. Today, we are driven out of our own land that you gave us. Help us to get back on our land from our ancestors.»

Despite the militaristic overtones that such references to the story of the Israelites in the Hebrew bible must have carried for listeners who were familiar with the biblical narrative, other references to the bible and to Christian elements in general were decidedly used to support nonviolence within the KYM. In a general sense, this could already be seen in the prayer cited above which stated: «We kneel in front of you because we don't want to kneel before men». The idea was specified further in the following statement made by the same pastor:

Though we want to destroy our enemy, there is God who stands above every evil. Let's submit all our doings upon him and let him do the rest. We don't know what will happen in the future. If we kneel before God who knows everything, we don't need to bow before men.<sup>36</sup>

It can be argued that this prayer projected the anger and the frustration with the Myanmar government and military upon God and, thus, advocated a 'spiritual' approach to nonviolent resistance. Another theological aspect that was expressed by pastors and resonated with the approach of nonviolence was the idea of showing «self-sacrificing love to your own people» because this was «what Jesus wants us to do».<sup>37</sup> The same idea was also picked up by one key informant when s/he was talking about her/his understanding of nonviolence: «The worse the effects of non-violence, the more it works. It's like a seed. If the seed decays, it will grow as a sprout. Despite having the trauma of experiencing violence, at least we get something worth in return.»<sup>38</sup>

The theme dominant in the of prayer was also comments. Besides

36 Ibid.

37 As has been shown already in chapter 3.3, protesters expressed the idea of self-sacrifice also in a nonreligious manner: "We are sacrificing our lives and blood in the union of Myanmar. We are not lying just for the name "union". We are proving how much we love the union of Myanmar."

38 Interview in Myitkyina on 01.10.2020.

written prayers for the KYM, messages of general religious encouragement and blessings were common. Also, the theme of being in line with God's purposes when participating in the protests is evident in the comments as it is in the posts of the KYM. Like in the KYM posts, commenters also linked this idea to the notion that «God is with the Kachin people» and connected this to the territory of Kachin state: «May the peace of God overflowing [sic] to the beautiful and blessed land of Kachin and HIS Precious people. AMEN.» This was supplemented by numerous variations of blessings referring to the Kachin and to Kachin state. A large amount of such comments made general references to the militarized historical context of the Israelites as narrated in the Hebrew bible. The notion of «conquest» in conjunction with the Hebrew name for God, «Jehova», were common tropes that commenters used, e.g.: «The Lord of victory, Jehovah». Some of those messages explicitly referred to the Exodus narrative: «We must be like the Israelites who struggled to come from Egypt. Let's be strong. Let's be united. This must be what God wants. Keep fighting.»

Such messages also explicitly equated the experience of the Kachin with the Israelite's «journey to the promised land». Militaristic allusions peaked in comments like «You are Jesus's soldiers. Victory in Jesus's name», and «Christian's army rise up. May God bless.» Interestingly, like the posts of the KYM that featured allusions to the conquest of the promised land, also none of the related comments opposed the nonviolent approach of the KYM. Rather, they seem to be supporting nonviolence, sometimes in obvious ways like this: «Victory is in Jesus's hand. Let's dwell in God and he will answer our non-violent demonstrations. We are near to gain full independence. So, let's keep moving dear Kachin brothers, sisters and parents. We are praying.» This suggests that the KYM could tap into a strand of Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism that, despite militaristic overtones and the historical connections between Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism and the armed resistance of the KIA, was able to embrace nonviolence and provided a 'spiritual' outlet for the grievances as well as the hopes of the Kachin youth.

## 4 Discussion

It can be argued that the KYM's framing of the nonviolent protests in terms of a humanitarian purpose and of a peace movement made it easier for people to support the movement and get involved. The fact that the humanitarian purpose of the KYM was largely supported by commenters on Facebook suggests that there was little debate among the public about whether the cause of the KYM was rightful. A notable exception of course were the comments that defamed the KYM to be acting on behalf of the KIA. However, following the explanation of one key informant, these can be traced to largely unsuccessful attempts of pro-military actors to discredit the KYM.<sup>39</sup>

It is likely that, with other political concerns in the background besides the humanitarian one, the KYM would have been more contentious. It is, for instance, questionable if religious leaders would have supported the movement as much as they did if other political concerns had played a role. Without the support of religious leaders, it is unlikely that the KYM would have been able to mobilize that many people since, at least in its early phase, it depended on church networks to

distribute information to the youth. Once the movement had gained momentum and the posts on the Facebook page of the KYM had attracted sufficient attention among the youth, the importance of Facebook as a channel of information grew significantly, thus, somewhat diminishing the importance of church networks.

Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the influence of religious leaders on the participants of the protests remained important throughout the protests, also in terms of upholding the nonviolent character of the movement. It is therefore interesting to note that in the messages of religious leaders that were posted on Facebook as well as in the comments the influence of Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism can be clearly identified. However, despite the close historical links between Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism and the armed resistance of the KIA, references to a Christian Kachin identity and to Kachin state as the 'promised land' were never explicitly connected to calls for violence or armed resistance.<sup>40</sup> While they did touch upon the topic of a struggle for independence, they either left it open how independence should be achieved, decidedly supported the nonviolent approach, or framed the struggle of the Kachin in religious terms by stating that it was God who needed to intervene to make the Kachin achieve their

<sup>39</sup> Interview in Myitkyina on 05.10.2020.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Mandy Sadan, *Being and becoming Kachin. Histories beyond the state in the borderworlds of*

goal. This suggests that at least the strand of Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism that the religious leaders who participated in the movement represented and which undergirded the religious comments on the Facebook page of the KYM was able to integrate the nonviolent approach of the KYM. This is further confirmed by the fact that while a substantial number of comments opposing nonviolence can be found on the Facebook page of the KYM, this opposition is not framed in religious terms.<sup>41</sup>

Another interesting aspect of the Christian background of the KYM is how this background was used to elevate the protesters' sense of unity and participation. It can be argued that this contributed to keeping inclined protesters from using violence. It is likely that taking part frequently in religious group activities, such as «praise and worship» and prayer, generated a sense of belonging and connection among protesters. Thus, a feeling of «unity», an often-employed theme in posts as well as comments, was cultivated that was grounded in Christian beliefs and values which could be made to blend in well with a nonviolent approach. Additionally, praying for leaders who were involved in negotiations with the

government or praying for the safe return of IDPs allowed the participants to make 'spiritual' contributions to the movement which, for a believer, must have felt important. This suggests that prayer could have acted as a valve that allowed to release the frustrations of the protesters with the at times slow progress of negotiations. The online sphere of Facebook also seems to have played an important role in this regard as it provided an additional environment in which this sense of unity and participation could be cultivated among participants.

Framings of the nonviolent approach of the KYM in terms of unity and participation also resonate with framings in terms of democratic representation that can be found in various posts and comments. The solidarity of other ethnic groups with the cause of the KYM as well as the national orientation that can be identified in posts of the KYM point to the fact that «national crises and outpourings of solidarity are now being facilitated and intermediated through Facebook», as McCarthy argues. At the same time, he goes on, the importance «of social media in reinforcing – and forging – new conceptualisations of citizenship and political community» is growing.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, the inadequate political representation of minority ethnic

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Burma, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 323f., 372f.

41 There is one exception of a comment stating: "God bless the Kachin KIA".

42 Gerard McCarthy, *Cyber-spaces*, in: *Routledge handbook of contemporary Myanmar*, ed. by Adam Simpson, Nicholas Farrelly, and Ian Holliday, London, New York: Routledge, 2018, 92–105: 97.

groups in the Myanmar government – a factor looming large behind the Kachin IDP issue – can be interpreted as a point of convergence that allowed for the inclusion of actors from different ethnic and political backgrounds. Facebook offered a virtual space in which activists from all over the country, and indeed all over the world, could express their solidarity with the Kachin IDPs and the KYM and could voice their frustration with the current state of political representation in Myanmar. This also reminds of what McCarthy claims regarding the role of Facebook in terms of issues around religious rights in Myanmar: he emphasizes the «increasing centrality of Facebook and the networks that it has intensified and broadened in attracting attention to localised cases of injustice» and further stresses that Facebook made accessible «mechanisms for citizens to mobilise» around these issues.<sup>43</sup>

Moreover, the KYM's framing of its approach as constructive dialogue and its use of nonviolent resistance in general stood in contrast to the approach of armed resistance of Myanmar's various EAOs. On the one hand, the youth as the next generation of leaders thus put forward another approach of dealing with some of the unresolved political problems of Myanmar. On the other hand, gathering virtually on Facebook and commenting

on the inadequacies of the government's response to the protests, most prominently the weak rule of law and the government's reluctance to listen to the protesters, more and more youth joined a new public sphere which the nonviolent approach of the KYM in combination with the virtual space on Facebook had allowed to emerge.

## 5 Conclusion

When reflecting on the present situation in Myanmar in light of the findings presented above, the following needs to be stressed: one cornerstone of the nonviolent protests led by the KYM was the conviction that their purpose was above all humanitarian. For the KYM, on the one hand, this provided a rationale for emphasizing the need for a nonviolent approach. On the other hand, this enabled the movement to appear non-revolutionary, if not apolitical. Considering current events, it must be assumed that security forces would have reacted with much more violence if the KYM had followed a more political agenda. Moreover, the present protest movement necessarily sees itself as a political movement. This makes it different from the KYM in a crucial point.

Another nonviolent protests cornerstone went hand in hand with the success of the dialogue with a constructive KYM was that the dialogue with

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 98.



the government. In the current situation, however, any hopes for constructive dialogue seem far-fetched. This partly explains why the appeal of armed resistance is constantly gaining ground, also and especially among the youth. Furthermore, it needs to be considered that nonviolence remained a contested approach also in the KYM, even though it operated under more favorable circumstances than the present protest movement. Moreover, this study has shown that the long-standing grievances of minority ethnic groups in Myanmar, such as their inadequate political representation and the weak rule of law, are powerful

drivers that lead people to call for the use of violence when no viable alternative is in sight.

It is also interesting to note that in the case of the KYM, Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism seems to have undergirded rather than undermined the approach of nonviolence. It might be valuable to study further what role religious institutions, religious leaders, and other elements of religious belief and practice are playing in supporting or opposing the approach of nonviolent resistance in the present protest movement.

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**SURVEY OF THE LITERATURE ON CIVIL  
WAR AND ETHNIC REBELLION**

**Dr. Jap Ja Ngai Awng**

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## Grievances and Ethnic Rebellion

### *Introduction*

Why are civil war so common? Why do ethnic groups rebel? One of the major research agenda in comparative politics in the past few decades have been to explain occurrences civil war and ethnic rebellion. This focus on internal conflict is deserving, as they have become more common since decolonization. Consider the following statistics: between 1945 and 1999 there were roughly 127 civil wars across 73 countries whereas there were 25 interstate wars that involved 25 countries in the same period (Fearon & Laitin 2003). In some countries civil war seems to be never ending. Myanmar, for example, has experience civil war for the entirety of its existence as a modern nation-state and the war continues with full steam even after 71 years. This essay summarizes some of the leading theories in political science on the topic of civil war and ethnic rebellion.

The vast majority of theories on civil war and ethnic rebellion can be grouped as grievance- or opportunity-based explanations. This section starts with the former which is much older than the latter. Generally speaking, the grievance-based explanations argue that ethnic groups in rebellion are motivated by political grievances, and suggest that built-up grievances lead to violence, including protests and rebellions. In particular, the group's perception of its position relative to others and its relative expectation of change in position feed into grievances and frustration, which eventually grow to violent acts (Gurr 1970). In other words, if the portion of an ethnic minority group who feel grievances against the government pass a certain threshold level, then that ethnic group would rebel. In a similar manner, Horowitz (1985) argues that "backward groups in backward regions" are often early seceders because they presume that the other ethnic groups are more "sharp-witted," "industrious" and better educated than they are and thus, they do not stand a chance competing with them within the bounds of

a single political arena. Therefore, rather than participate in a prolonged negotiation process in which they expect to lose, the “backward” ethnic groups might create another political arena where they alone could dominate.

Although grievance-based explanations date back to 1970, its claims were not systematically tested until 1990s. These tests utilize statistical tools to examine if there is evidence of correlational relationship between political grievances and ethnic rebellion. Spearheaded by Ted Gurr, the Minorities at Risk (MAR) Project was initiated in 1986 and tracks over 200 politically-active ethnic minority groups throughout the world from 1945 to the present. This dataset became the basis for one of the first comprehensive group-level analysis of correlational relationship between grievances and ethnic rebellion. Based on this dataset, Gurr finds issues of group power and status, such as political rights, political autonomy and contention for state power are the principle issues driving grievances for ethnonationalist conflicts (1993; 1994).

Although MAR dataset allows for empirical testing, scholars argue that it has several limitations. The dataset includes only the “minorities at risk” even though ethnic majorities can also lack political rights and access to state power. Additionally, it codes ethnic group power

status as a fixed characteristic even though it can change from one period to another. To better examine the relationship between ethnic groups’ power status and propensity for conflict, scholars compiled a new dataset, titled “Ethnic Power Relations” (EPR). This new dataset has propelled a number of noteworthy journal articles. Studies based on this dataset find that ethnic groups are more likely to rebel the more they are excluded from state power (Cederman et al, 2010; Wucherpfennig et al., 2016). They also find that “decentralization has a significant conflict-preventing effect where there is no prior conflict history” and that in post-conflict settings, “granting autonomy can still be helpful in combination with central power sharing arrangements” (Cederman et al. 2015, pp. 354). In sum, empirical studies have shown that political grievances, and access to power in the central government, is associated with ethnic rebellion.

## ***Opportunity and Ethnic Rebellion***

Some scholars are dissatisfied with grievance-based explanations. They argue that not every grievance grows into a full-fledged rebellion, which means relying on grievance-based explanation would over predict outbreak of ethnic rebellions. Therefore, opportunity-based explanations argue that rather than political grievances,

opportunity to rebel—meaning conditions that makes rebellion more viable or “atypical opportunities for building a rebel organization” (Collier & Hoeffler 2004)—better predicts the outbreak of armed rebellions.

The leading voice of this strand of argument, and also one of the most widely cited articles in political science, finds that ethnic and religious diversity does not make a country more prone to civil war (Fearon & Laitin 2003). Rather, it argues that civil wars are more likely in poor countries, weak states, and countries with mountainous terrain. In fact, the odds of civil war onset are estimated as 5.25 times more likely in the first two years of a states’ independent existence than in other years. The rationale underlying this argument is that countries with these characteristics have a much harder time conducting counterinsurgency. For example, poor countries and weak states, such as new states and those with political instability, have fewer resources to obtain information about budding insurgency. Similarly, in countries with mountainous terrain, the rebels are able to hide out in places that are much harder to reach for the government.

Another well cited paper in this line of argument is an article in Oxford Economic Papers by Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler (2004). This paper examines effects of several indicators of opportunity and grievances on civil

war onset. Regarding indicators of opportunity, it focuses on three factors: financing rebellion, low cost of rebellion and government military capability. Indeed, rebellions are costly—rebel organizations have to buy arms, pay and feed the rebel soldiers, etc. Thus, if potential rebels are unable to obtain finance necessary to fund the rebellion (the extortion of natural resources, donations from diasporas, and subventions from hostile governments as possible sources of fund), civil war onset may not occur even if the ethnic group harbor strong grievances against the host country. Atypical opportunity for rebellion might also come from unusually low cost of joining a rebellion. Starting and sustaining a rebellion requires soldiers. If the potential recruits’ foregone income is usually low—for example, if a high percentage of potential recruit population have low level of formal education and are without employment—then it might be less costly for them to join (or be recruited to) a rebellion. Furthermore, even if it is possible to build a rebel organization, it might still be stamped out by the government in the organization’s nascent stages if the government’s military capability is strong. All these factors are classic examples of opportunities that potentially contribute to building a viable rebel organization, and they are used as opportunity for rebellion is operationalized as these indicators in the analysis by Collier and Hoeffler. Their analysis finds that indicators of opportunity,

proxied by economic indicators, are associated with onset of rebellion while indicators of grievances (ethnic or religious hatred, political repression, political exclusion and economic inequality) are not statistically significant. These findings regarding opportunity are also confirmed by later studies (Cederman et al 2009; Miguel et al 2004).

## ***Bargaining, Regime Type and Civil War***

As mentioned above, the main explanations for ethnic rebellion and civil war are either grievance- or opportunity-based, which are nevertheless structural in nature. While structural conditions give rise to political grievance and opportunities that make rebellion more viable, they do not inevitably culminate in rebellion. According to the bargaining literature, dynamic processes of contention and negotiation occur before and during ethnic rebellion and that rebellion begin in the first place because of bargaining failure (Walter 2009). Because war is costly for both the state and the ethnic group, war is unlikely the first encounter between the two parties when there is a dispute. The state and the ethnic group bargain until either side, usually the ethnic group, decide that a more extreme measure is necessary to put pressure on the other side. Put differently, onset of civil war is simply a continuation of bargaining

between the state and the ethnic group.

If civil war is a result of bargaining failure, then it is important for us to understand why bargaining failure occur and in under what conditions. Bargaining failures occur partly because information and commitment problem—the two opposing parties do not have perfect information about one another’s capability and intention and do not trust one another to follow through with what they say they will do (Walter 2009). According to the leading voice in bargaining literature, countries with weak political and legal institutions are less likely to be able to facilitate the opposing sides to overcome their information and commitment problems, and thus are more prone to divulge into civil war (Walter 2009).

The recognition that information and commitment problems are roadblocks to successful ethnic bargaining leads to an argument that countries without institutional capacity to alleviate commitment problems are more prone to bargaining failure (Walter 2009); and this argument is highly consistent with the findings in the civil war literature that focuses on regime type. These studies argue that onset of civil war is more likely in countries with mid-range polity scores or anocracies, rather than in “coherent” democracies or “harshly” authoritarian states (Hegre et al. 2001). That is because anocracies exhibit institutional inconsistency, which can lead to regime instability (Gates et al. 2006), and

thus, unlikely to be conducive to successful bargaining; and bargaining failure coupled with regime instability then provides a fertile ground for insurgency. Other scholars are skeptical that there is a causal relationship between mid-range polity score and onset of civil war. Vreeland (2008), for example, argues that once violence is disaggregated from the Polity index, the inverted-U relationship between Polity score and onset of civil war disappears. Furthermore, Regan and Bell (Regan and Bell 2010) find that transition into anocracy, rather than specific political-institutional characteristics of anocracies, better explain the observed correlation between anocracies and onset of civil war. In sum, while the bargaining literature agrees that structural conditions affect likelihood of civil war, their effects occur most likely through the way in which they affect information and commitment problems.

## ***Concluding Note***

The aim of this essay is to highlight some of the leading theories in political science on onset of civil war and armed rebellion, and to give readers a general understanding of the way in which political scientists have thought about and answered the very questions they may have also pondered (see Blattman and Miguel 2010 for a more comprehensive review of the literature). As this essay has shown, explaining civil war and ethnic rebellion is still an ongoing debate. The more recent studies are now focused on trying to understand how existing explanations fit together and mechanisms linking structural conditions to onset of rebellion (Bormann et al. 2019).



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**Students' Democratic Participation at Lower  
Secondary Schools in the Kachin Area of  
Myanmar**

**Dr. Lahpai Nang Htang**

# Students' Democratic Participation at Lower Secondary Schools in the Kachin Area of Myanmar

Dr. Lahpai Nang Htang

## Background and Rationale of the Study

The rights to freedom of expression of students and their participation in decision making should be respected and prioritized in school. For participation in social issues and life, it provides student's individual development, increases their potential and informs their overall personalities through interacting in classroom and participation practices. This study was designed to investigate how teachers offer students participation in the classroom and schoolwork. The specific objectives of this study were to identify the practices (levels) of students' democratic participation in schoolwork at lower secondary and to develop democratic participation improvement guidelines for lower secondary school in the Kachin area of Myanmar. The research uses a convergent mixed method approach. A questionnaire was distributed to 234 participants. Four focus group discussions with parents were conducted, plus in-depth interviews with Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) education officers. This study's results show students' democratic participation is "low" at lower secondary school in the Kachin area of Myanmar.

Preparing students for the 21st Century is not just about school, but also ensuring a high-quality education. The United Nation believes that students obtain quality education through accessing effective teaching by qualified teachers matched with a good learning environment. Even though around the world people agree to provide quality education, few implement it effectively in practice, due to a lack of understanding about quality. For instance, rote learning is to be a strong indicator of poor-quality education. Myanmar education was the best in the Southeast Asia 50 years ago (Oxford Burma Alliance, 2017), but the quality of Myanmar education has declined after decades of military rule. Students in good education settings have the opportunity to discuss and input their ideas inside and outside the classroom. However, current students rarely get that opportunity in Myanmar, including students who attend KIO schools in Kachin state.

A child-centered approach was introduced to all KIO teachers from 2006. Child-centered instruction aims to improve traditional teachers' instruction (Hayden

and Martin,2013). However, teachers do not fully understand and apply the concept. This impacts students' thinking, questioning and problem-solving skills, as they instead focus on memorization, teacher's lecturing and textbooks. The lesson and activities provide minimal motivation to engage because the lessons have too much text to memorize, and the activities rarely include higher-order thinking skills, nor collaborative or cooperative approaches. The school heads do not provide much instructional leadership in school. They can't give much time for instructional matters and school management activities because they also have to teach at least four periods per day. Similarly, teachers do not have much time for preparation, which is likely to cause poor instruction and poor student achievement. It's hard to provide quality education when schools face these challenges.

Manyschoolsfaceotherchallenges, such as inadequate classrooms, big class sizes, limited professional development opportunities for teachers, and a pass/fail assessments system. In addition, schools encounter physical resources limitations and insufficient qualified teachers.

Therefore, this study intends to investigate to what extent teachers offer student participation in schoolwork.

Using democratic participation in schoolworkrequires teachersto understand the concept of child rights. Such teachers can provide various activities that can engage students in development of social dimensions through participation, even if the activities are not directly connected to academic subjects (Adegoke and Nweneka, 2016). Students with democratic participation increase curiosity, ask questions and receive answers, have the right to argue and disagree, make mistakes, are creativity and more spontaneous (Cobanoglu, Ayvaz-Tuncel and Ordu,2018).

This study aims "to identify the practices (levels) of students' democratic participation at lower secondary school" and "to develop democratic participation improvement guidelines for lower secondary school in the Kachin area of Myanmar". The research questions are: "What are the practices (levels) of students' democratic participation at lower secondary in the Kachin area of Myanmar?" and "What are the component of students'

democratic participation improvement guidelines for lower secondary schools in the Kachin area of Myanmar?”

The concept of child rights is associated with four rights-based principles: (1) preventing discrimination, (2) behaving in the best interests of the child, (3) ensuring the child lives and remain at the highest possible level, and (4) allowing the children to express themselves in any situation that affects them (UNICEF, 2007 and Shakya, 2017). It is a humanistic pedagogy (Stamatovic and Cicvaric, 2019) focused on issues of personality and its development, activity, creativity, autonomy, self-actualization, freedom of choice, responsibility and orientation towards higher goals and values. Characteristics of humanistic education focus on participation.

Schoolwork must be done by learners’ participation. They can involve planning their own schoolwork and group activities. There are two participation forms, namely the political and social dimensions of participation in educational settings (Niemi, 2019). The political dimension usually defines working with the school council and engaging with the political structures of adult society. Social participation is belonging to community, membership of groups and positive social interdependence. Regarding the social dimension, formal processes such as

participation in learning activities and informal processes relevant to the social environment, such as participation in family issues, peer relationships and neighborhood relationship are examples of the social dimension (Samanci, Ocakci and Secer, 2018).

The idea of participation in classroom practices consists of four forms, which are active joining, collaborative participation, child-oriented participation and child-led participation. Active joining: a teacher creates learning activities in which a student can work actively. All activities are led by both without power inequality. The activities support learners’ everyday communication and relatedness to others. Collaborative participation: teachers are responsible for choosing topics for the lessons defined in the curriculum. Teachers and learners share discussions and the lesson format evolves. Learners’ prior lesson knowledge, their thoughts and ideas inform the direction of the lesson through collaboration with the teacher. This form helps learner with decision-making, with an emphasis on the social dimension of participation. Child-oriented participation: the teacher is assistant and facilitator for the students’ idea accomplishment (learners’ own ideas and wishes) in the learning process. A teacher’s role is continually present by setting timetables, helping group work and giving suggestions to reach outcomes successfully. The

students take responsibility for their own learning and their role making decision recognizes their role as an agent. Child-led participation: this a situation where students can learn without adult interference. The situation depends on the student's own will from beginning to end. It is generally situations in which a learner takes a lead from a classroom activity and the learner shares their expertise on behalf of the classroom community. Therefore, Kiili and Moilanen (2019) mentioned that learners' participation inevitably considers their matters, challenges and needs, to inform how they act and work.

Student participation requires mental and emotional function, which indicates a learning environment that increases the need to create participation opportunities (Triyanto, 2019). As cognitive participation depends on the type of task, the task determines the degree of student engagement and participation. For instant, activities working in groups, engaging in discussion and listening all require different levels of cognitive engagement.

There are also different levels of student's autonomy: the more autonomous they perceive activity the higher they participate. However, class barriers and students' lack of confidence can reduce participation (James,2016). Many researchers suggest that comfortable learning spaces encourage student

participation (Hyun, Ediger and Lee, 2017). Research has also found that if students do not have motivation for participation, they lose focus and become bored. Being bored at school can then impact on academic achievement and lead students to leave school (Tasgin and Tunc, 2018). Creating and/or supporting frequent participation in decision-making develops personal characteristics like openness, activity, self-assurance and independence, and experiencing new challenges improves self-confidence and with curiosity can convince students to engage in active participation (Mithans, Grmek and Cagran ,2017).

## Methodology

This study used a mixed-method design. Using both quantitative and qualitative methods helps to form a deep understanding of the issue. Descriptive statistics were used for quantitative data and content analysis was used for qualitative data. The negative question items were analyzed with a recording system. There were 38 questions used in this study. The questionnaire was distributed to 200 students,30 teachers and 4 school heads. The research also included classroom observation at four schools. In-depth interviews with KIO education officers and 4 focus group discussion were also conducted. This research focused on grades five to eight from four lower secondary schools (Nba Pa high school,

Sut Ngai Middle school, Prang Ngawn Middle school and Maija Yang high school) in the Kachin area of Myanmar. The question items were analyzed using Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient ( $\alpha$ ) to determine its reliability. The reliability of Cronbach's Alpha value not less than ( $\alpha = 0.65$ ) was accepted.

## Results

The score interpretation 1.00-1.90 was "Low", 1.91-2.55 was as "Moderate" and 2.56-3.00 was "High". Table 1 shows the practice (levels) of students' democratic participation at lower secondary school in the Kachin area of Myanmar.

**Table 1. students' democratic participation at lower secondary school**

<b>Democratic participation scales</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Interpretation</b>
<b>Challenging student-centered learning environment (student survey)</b>	<b>2.14</b>	<b>.892</b>	<b>Moderate</b>
<b>Child participation (teacher survey)</b>	<b>1.76</b>	<b>.591</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Child participation (school head)</b>	<b>1.50</b>	<b>.657</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Child-centered pedagogy (classroom observation)</b>	<b>1.80</b>	<b>.414</b>	<b>Low</b>
<b>Overall student democratic participation</b>	<b>1.80</b>	<b>.639</b>	<b>Low</b>

Table 1 showed a mean score of 1.80. The practice (levels) of student' democratic participation was "low" at lower secondary school. The table also indicates each democratic participation scales' mean score.

The mean score of 2.14 for the student survey was "Moderate". Among 14 items measured, items 3, 8 and 14 were "low". They were (3) *"lessons at this school are boring"*, (8) *"I have given up on school"* and (14) *"students at this school try to do a good job on their lessons, even if they are difficult or not interesting"*.

The mean score of 1.76 for teachers was "low". Among 3 items measured, 2 items were "low". They are (16) *"In this school, students are given a chance to help make decisions"* and (17) *"The principal (school director) asks students about their ideas"*. Similarly, the mean score of 1.50 for school heads was "low". Among

4 items measured, all of them were “low”. They were (18) “Students play a formal role in decision-making at school (e.g. through student government)”, (19) “students at this school plan and implement community outreach activities”, (20) “students at my school have opportunities to serve in leadership roles, such as a member of the student council, governing board, or prefect”, and (21) “students regularly take part in activities like group projects, field trips, group brainstorming, etc.”

The mean score of 1.80 for classroom observation was “low”. Among 17 items measured, 6 items were “low”. They were (22) “The teacher presents lessons in a well-prepared and organized manner”, (25) “The teacher gives the students the opportunity to present their work to the rest of the class in groups or on their own”, (26) “The teacher asks questions that facilitate higher order thinking activities (e.g., application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, etc.)”, (27) “The teacher relates information presented in the lesson to students’ lives outside of the classroom, or to life skills or social emotional learning”, (34) “The students pay attention when the teacher gives them instructions” and (35) “The students ask the teacher questions”. Table 2 describes students’ democratic participation improvement guidelines. According to the research results, the practice (levels) of student’ democratic participation was critically weak at lower secondary school in the Kachin area of Myanmar. In order to improve, the following guidelines are recommended.

**Table 2 students’ democratic participation improvement guidelines**

Democratic Participation Issue	Function for Implementation	guideline
Challenging student-centered learning environment (student survey)	1. The Kachin schools must provide the learning content that students feel interesting and useful for them	Needs assessments and review meetings can be conducted to evaluate the learning content. The feedback can be used to address the needs of student and schools.



Child participation (teacher survey)	8. The Kachin school heads and teachers must provide participation opportunities in decision-making and leadership activities.	Empowerment students in school activities, create opportunities for student leadership, skills can be improved with participation opportunities in decision-making. The experience of their participation can promote the need of their learning.
Child participation (school head)		
Child-centered pedagogy (classroom observation)	9. The Kachin school head must build a professional learning community by gathering feedback on teaching methods, resources to plan lessons and materials to implement the curriculum, plus access to teacher development opportunities such as workshops, seminars and trainings.	Regularly reviews and reporting on the situations of teaching and learning, and seeking feedback from teachers and students can be conducted to upgrade the need of teacher.

## Discussion

The overall mean score of 1.80 demonstrates “low” student democratic participation in the Kachin area of Myanmar. This result indicates teachers inadequate use of pedagogy and a lack of professionalism in teaching and learning. This study found that *students who study lessons that are not interesting or boring are less likely to stay in school*. Parents mentioned that students have language

difficulties because subjects are written in Burmese, but the medium of instruction is Kachin, and some lesson have too much text to memorize. Students are bored to go school when the lessons and activities are boring. This result suggests that teacher interaction in “classroom discussion” must be effective, classes need to be carefully prepared and the teacher’s guidelines for discussion should be clear (Sieberer-

Nagler, 2016). In addition, to promote students' democratic participation Dietrich et. al (2015) suggest that diversity instructional methods should be conducted to improve relationships between teachers and students. Removing inclusion barriers to learning through adaptive support, valuing and acceptance of all learners, and increasing high quality learning are also important (Schwab, Sharma and Loreman ,2018). Therefore, teachers must be prepared to cultivate an inclusive learning classroom environment to engage and support students to their full potential

(Dare and Nowicki ,2018).

*The three authority education officers* mentioned teachers are satisfied with their professional job, professional growth (motivation, well-being and commitment to teaching), but can struggle with low performance, poor working conditions and interpersonal relations. Klassen and Chiu (2010) argue this is due to low salary. The salaries for teachers has a correlation to the improvement of quality learning for students.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

Giving students participation is using a basic democratic teaching approach. For example, students should be given opportunities for leadership roles, making decisions and collaborating with peers, plus community support for students' participation and teachers cultivating students' participation. According to this study, schools need to promote students'

democratic participation at lower secondary in the Kachin area of Myanmar. For this to happen, implementing the included functions and guidelines would be useful to improve students' democratic participation at lower secondary schools in the Kachin area of Myanmar. Future research could explore experimental designs to promote students' democratic participation in the Kachin school system.

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Zaw Tu Hkawng

**THE ILL-BEING OF  
MYANMAR REFUGEES IN  
MALAYSIA**

# THE ILL-BEING OF MYANMAR REFUGEES IN MALAYSIA

Zaw Tu Hkawng

## ABSTRACT

More than a million people from Myanmar are refugees in Malaysia. For many, Malaysia has become their second home. However, they are classified as illegal immigrants because Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the status of Refugees. As a result, they live under risky and dangerous conditions in Malaysia. Utilizing a quantitative research methodology, data collection and analysis for this research has revealed the ill-being of Myanmar refugees including their primary needs, challenges, dangers, problems, and fears that they face daily.

**Key Words:** Myanmar, refugees, Malaysia, displacement

## WHAT IS A REFUGEE?

In accordance with the United Nations 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocols and the U.S Congress, a refugee is defined as:

“Any person who is outside of any country of such person’s nationality or, in the person having no nationality, is outside any country in which such person last resided, and who is unable or unwilling to avail himself or herself of the protection country because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.”

(Immigration and National Act, Section 101 (a), 42). (Ilona Bray 2015) (Trieu 2014)

## REASONS FOR LEAVING MYANMAR

Hundreds of thousands of people from Myanmar had to flee from armed conflicts, forced labor by the army, communal violence, burning of their homes and villages, raping of their women and girls and other violations of rights. These

are just some of the causes of forced migration. Human rights abuse or violations, such as religious, ethnic, and political persecutions were and are very severe in Myanmar (REFUGEES SG, «Burmese Refugees» 2007). The International Rescue Committee has reported the detailed

reasons for leaving Myanmar as follows: forced labor/portering (25%), human rights abuses (15%), escape arrest (12%), lack of work opportunities (8%), violence/attack by the military (8%), join family/get married (6%), religious abuses (6%), escape forced military conscription (4%), ethnic discrimination (4%), government land confiscation (4%), food shortages (3%),

abuse/persecution of a family member (2%), escape gender-based violence (1%), lack of education opportunities (1%), and other (1%). These results are based on a survey of 1,003 Myanmar refugees in the city of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia in 2012 (Smith 2012).

## **MALAYSIA: SECOND HOME TO MYANMAR REFUGEES**

Malaysia is regarded as having one of the largest refugee populations in East Asia. In accordance with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Malaysia, there were 158,510 refugees and asylum seekers who were already registered in February 2016. (UNHCR Malaysia, «Figure at a glance» 2016). However, Malaysia is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention (UNHCR The UN Refugee Agency, «The 1951 Refugee Convention» 2016) relating to the Status of Refugees. As a result, there is no legislative and administrative framework to address refugee matters in Malaysia (The UN Refugee Agency Malaysia, «UNHCR in Malaysia» 2011) and the actual number of refugees and asylum seekers is far higher than 'official' figures.

### **RESEARCH METHOD**

A quantitative research methodology was applied for this research with a sample size for this research paper of 240 people. The participants were carefully selected by the "Coalitions of Burma Ethnics, Malaysia (COBEM)." COBEM helped to distribute all of the quantitative research questionnaires. The research period took one month (1st to 30th November, 2015). Descriptive analysis was used to report the general conditions of Myanmar refugees in Malaysia.

### **RESEARCH LOCATION**

Myanmar refugees were living in all different parts of Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia. The largest percentage of the respondents (45%) resided in the city center which includes the areas such as Pudu, Imbi, Bukit Bintang, Kotarayar, Jalan Alor, and Chow Kit. One of the main reasons

why the city center has the highest number of respondents is likely because of economic considerations and it is a place where people can find a job relatively easily. It is also one of the top destinations for international travelers (Penny 2016).

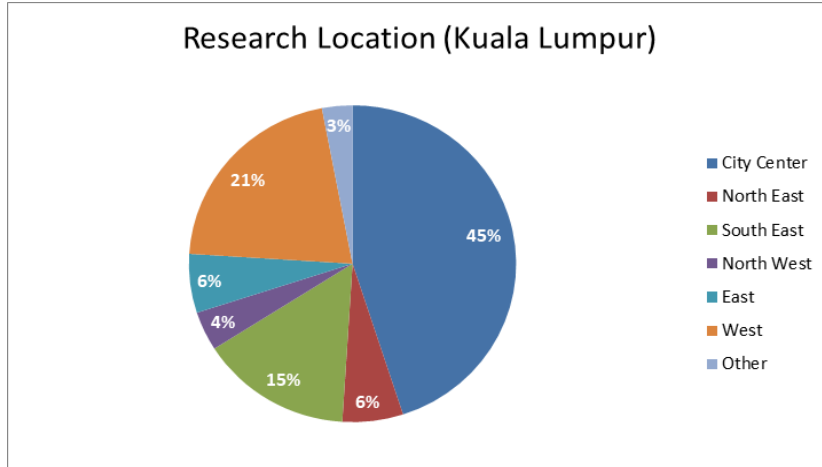


Figure 1: Research Location (Kuala Lumpur)

## MYANMAR REFUGEES BY ETHNIC GROUPS

The sample of the ethnicity was formulated by the COBEM, which is included all the

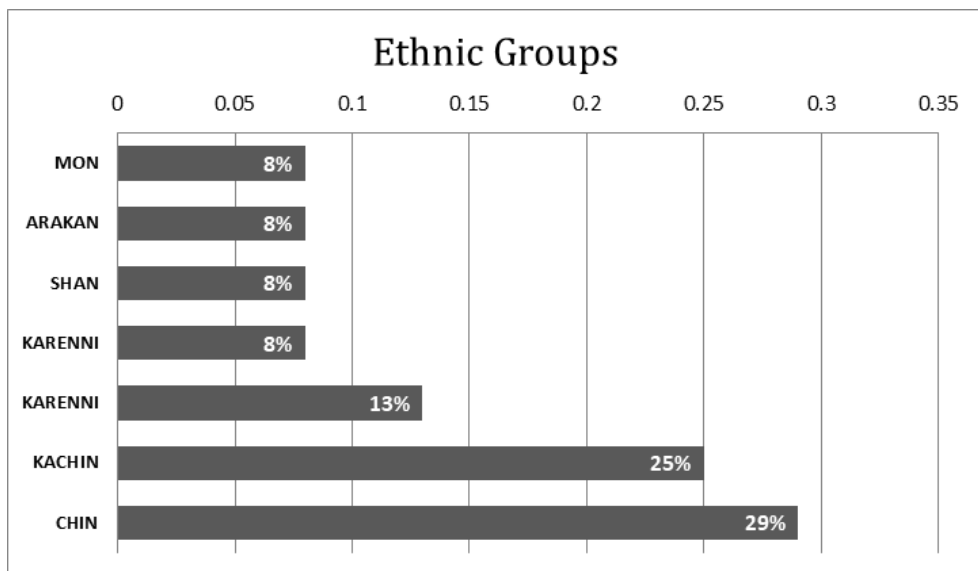


Figure 2: Ethnic Groups



different ethnic groups of Myanmar. The ethnic Chin group was the largest percentage (30%) of the sample; the second largest group was Kachin (25%); Karen comprised 12% of the sample, and Karenni, Shan, Arakan, and Mon collectively composed of 8% of the sample.

## DESCRIPTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONDITIONS OF MYANMAR REFUGEES PRIMARY NEEDS

For Myanmar refugees living in Malaysia, there are many things that should be provided to meet their basic needs. They are living under very risky and threatening conditions such as Malaysian police extortion, violent attack by thugs

or gangsters, employers' abuse, and other threats. Among a variety of needs and supports, the 240 respondents were asked about their seven primary needs and the degree of needs are classified into four groups.

Primary needs	Not Significant	Somewhat Significant	Significant	Very Significant
Information on	1%	7%	20%	73%
Resettlement/ Registration	0%	6%	25%	69%
Protection assistance	5%	19%	29%	47%
Food aid	6%	22%	25%	48%
Cash assistance	2%	9%	26%	63%
Health and Psychological service	0%	6%	16%	78%
Education for Self/ Children	0%	6%	16%	78%
Children protection and development	2%	3%	19%	77%

**Figure 3: Primary Needs**

Out of 240 respondents, 78% have identified education for self/children as their first primary need. The majority of the survey participants were students (17.08%) and

social workers (17.50%). Many of the Myanmar refugees are mostly concerned about their children with their second primary needs being children protection and development (77%). One of the main reasons for them to become a refugee was to improve opportunities for the

future of their children. They were hoping that the future of their children would be bright and shine with Malaysia less foreign than Western countries. The third primary needs for Myanmar refugees was about information on resettlement and/or registration (73%). Having a UN refugee

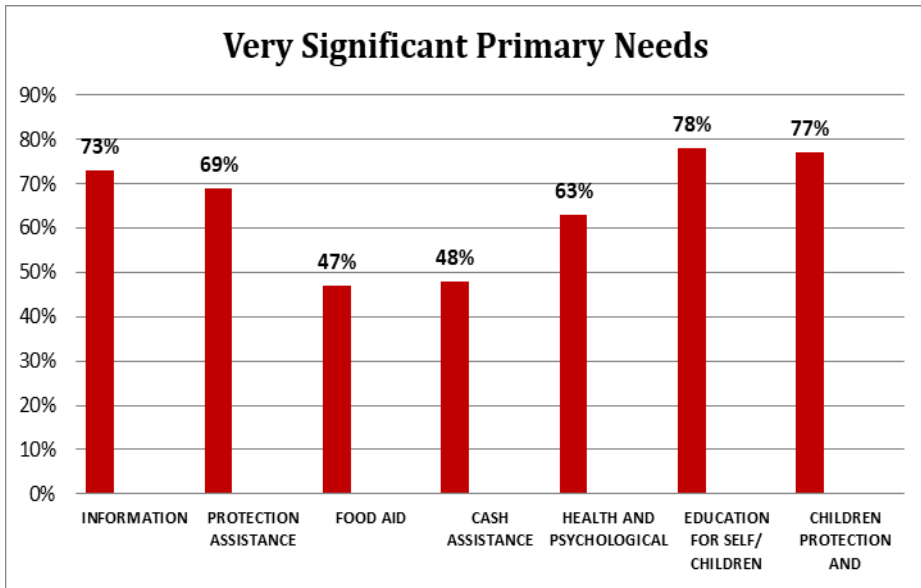


Figure 4: Very Significant Primary Needs

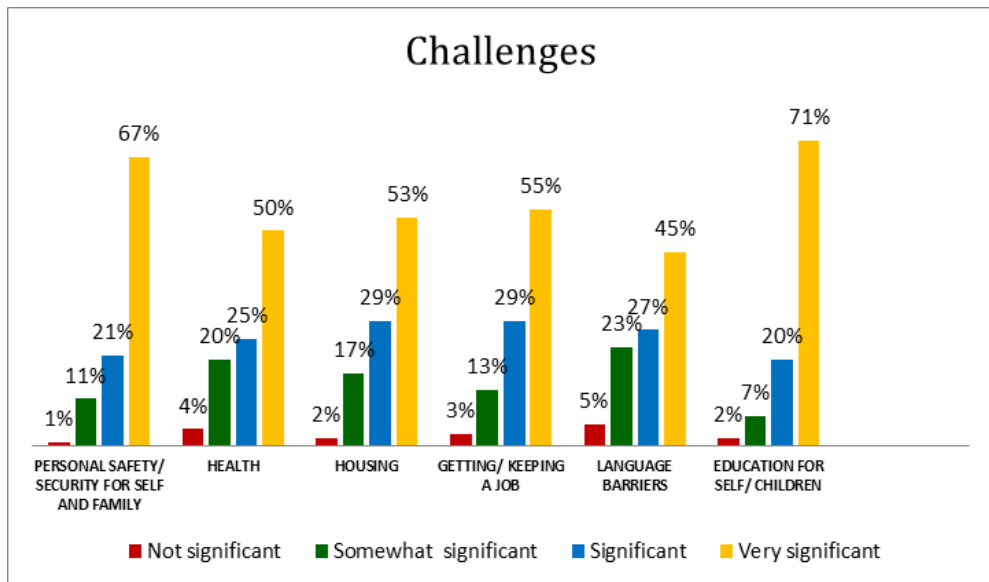
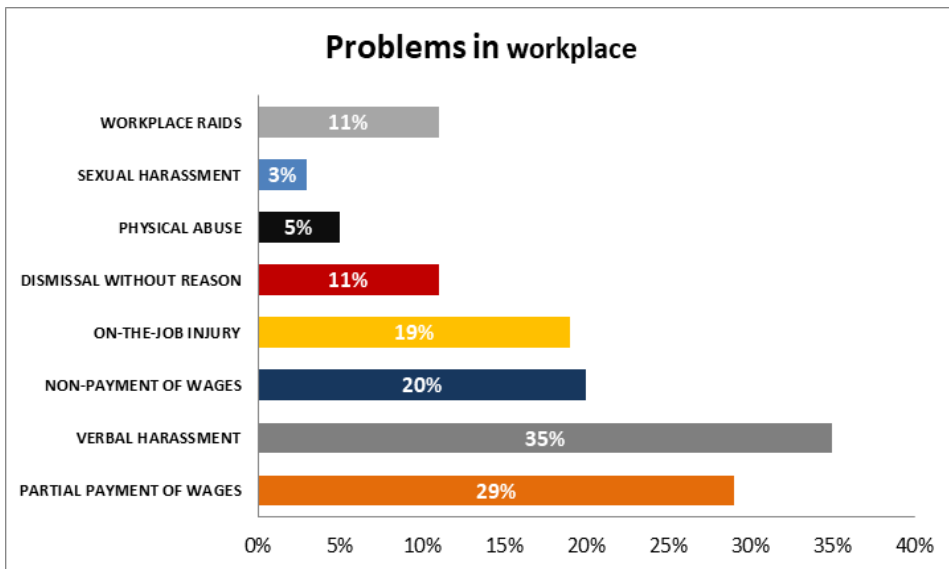


Figure 5: Challenges

card means a lot to Myanmar refugees, as it is the one and only document that is recognized by the Malaysian government to consider someone a refugee. Many benefits can be obtained for a UN refugee card holder, such as 50% discount for health services at general hospitals, general protection from arrest and detention, and be able to obtain employment legally. Life in Kula Lumpur is very challenging for refugees. Based on a literature review about Myanmar refugees, six questions were developed with regard to their challenges.

In order to define the degree of challenges, four options were available. Among the six challenges, 71% reported that a lack of education for self and children was a very significant challenge. A significant portion of the respondents were social workers (17.50%) and students (17.08%) who are likely thirsty for knowledge and self-development. As Malaysia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, refugee students are not allowed to access the education. As a result, there is a lack of any formal education for Myanmar refugees.

## PROBLEMS AT WORKPLACE



**Figure 6: Problems in Workplace**

As Malaysia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention, Myanmar refugees are

considered as illegal immigrants. Due to its lack of legal protection for refugees, almost all of the refugees have experienced

workplace abuses. Among many serious problems in the workplace, eight problems are most visible. Many employers are very aware of the fact that Myanmar refugees are undocumented. This has become a main reason or opportunity for employers to exploit the employment of refugees in Malaysia. One of the most reported

problems at the workplace was verbal harassment (35%). The second most reported issue was the issue of feeling of disappointment and frustration when they are paid only part of their wages by their employers (29%). In addition, 20% of respondents did not receive any of their wages from their employers.

## OTHER PROBLEMS

Number of times												
Problems	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	>10
Malaysian Police Extortion	33	15	11	13	5	8	1	2	2	0	3	8
Pay bribes to Malaysian government official	71	8	6	6	2	2	1	1	1	0	1	1
Being attacked by thug or gangster	44	22	15	7	4	3	1	1	0	1	0	1
Harassed by local citizen	48	15	10	7	5	5	1	2	0	0	2	5
Arrested by police	62	20	5	5	1	1	0	1	0	0	2	3

Figure 7: Other Problems

Corruption in Malaysia is relatively common with 63% reporting that they have been extorted by Malaysian Police and for 8% of respondents it has happened more than 10 times. They had to pay with various items that they owned such as cell phones or other forms of valuables things. In one recent research paper, it mentioned

a very sad story that one widow had paid to the Malaysian police her wedding ring in order to obtain freedom for her daughter (Meagan Floyd 2014). Additionally, 29% of respondents admitted that they have paid bribes to Malaysian government officials. In one interview, one of the refugees expressed her struggle for survival even

if paid by their employers, as the money was taken by the police and other officials (Meagan Floyd 2014). Another threat for Myanmar refugees is from the local citizens who are very much aware of the lack of legal resources for refugees, leading to attacks by thugs and gangsters. 52% of

respondents have reported that they were harassed by local citizens and 55% of the participants described that they were attacked by thug or gangsters violently. Finally, 38% of respondents have reported that they were arrested by the police.

## CONCLUSION

Hundreds of thousands of people from Myanmar have become refugees in Malaysia mainly due to political, religious and social persecution and human rights violations by the military government. Although Malaysia is a transit country for many refugees before they were relocated in some of the Western countries like United States of America, Canada, and Australia, living in the city of Kuala Lumpur is very challenging for Myanmar refugee communities, particularly because Malaysia is not a signatory to the Refugee Convention. There is a lack of legal protection for refugees and the structure

and function of the UNHCR in Malaysia is also ineffective. As a consequence, Myanmar refugees are classified as illegal immigrants and they are constantly concerned with safety and security. Many refugees have experienced police extortion, attacks by the thugs or gangsters, and harassment by the local citizens. Moreover, they are economically struggling, physically exhausted, and psychologically distressed. All these facts demonstrate the ill-being of Myanmar refugees in Malaysia, despite it being like a second home.

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**Figure 3: Primary Needs**

**Figure 4: Very Significant Primary Needs**

**Figure 5: Challenges**

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**Figure 7: Other Problems**

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# **Myanmar's Democracy Trends and Political Awareness of University Students from Kachin State**

**Dabang Zawng Ze**

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## Abstract

For any nation, the new generation, youth and university students are there to lead the nation, serve the people and encourage changes for the nation towards creating a wealthy society, good environment and a nation with rule of law. Likewise, civic education and political awareness are also crucial at building the democratic system and practices in a nation. Myanmar has been under military dictatorship for many decades and peoples were brain-washed by the military dictatorship. This caused a lack of civic education and political awareness for many students. This article will briefly review university students' opinions, perceptions and political awareness. Furthermore, this article will analyze university students' opinions, perceptions and political awareness and provide some suggestions.

## 1. Introduction

Since colonial times and throughout history, university students' involvement in Myanmar's politics is significant, and they were important actors in Myanmar politics. They were important actors in the independence struggle and sacrificed many lives for that cause. From colonial rule to recent limited democratic governance, university students' role in Myanmar's political process remains crucial. In the future, the involvement of university students in Myanmar political processes will remain critical. Political engagement of university students in Myanmar is an evolving practice and knowledge base that cannot be undermined or terminated.

From successive governments to the current administration (Note: this research was conducted in 2020, pre coup), university students who engaged in politics are subject to various forms of punishment and prosecution for their actions. Throughout history, successive governments have been ruling with an iron fist towards citizens and restrict any political movements and freedom of



speech, while excluding political science courses from universities. The brutal crackdown on university students and civilians during the 1988 uprising was one of the ugliest and most oppressive events in the history of Myanmar.

When it comes to politics, the Myanmar public still cannot heal from fear, grievance and frustration of the past. As a result of political oppression by successive governments, citizens, and youth understanding of civic education are still limited. The education level and understanding of civic matters directly impacts democracy, requiring active participation from concerned citizens. The

political standpoint of university students who have played an important role in Myanmar politics throughout history and gained the highest education in the country is really important for future political arrangements.

This research is a detailed study of political standpoints, level of understanding on civic education, and views upon changing democratic trends of university students within Kachin state. This research paper includes views and recommendations of university students to the government to create an enabling environment for students to freely participate in politics.

## **2. Brief History of Myanmar Education Journey to Limited Democracy**

The modern-day Myanmar formal education journey begins when the British fully occupied Myanmar and started the Rangoon college, affiliated with a university from India. From then to the current administration, involvement of university students in Myanmar politics is significant, and they act as change agents (Thein Lwin, 2000).

In the struggle for independence, university students' effort was crucial and recorded as one of the most important

parts of the history of Myanmar. In the history-changing event of the 1988 uprising, we witnessed the importance of students' involvement in politics.

To explore the involvement of the university students after Myanmar got independence from the British and the 1988 uprising, the study also needs to focus on "How the Myanmar education system has been destroyed and changed by a group of peoples, the Myanmar military dictatorship". The Myanmar military dictatorship changed all the

education systems upside down, such as producing low quality teachers, changing the curriculum, corruption and forcing the teachers and school to implement a “No fail” policy, which meant no students failed, despite their educational attainment or lack thereof (U Han Tin, 2000).

It is fair to state that progress towards democracy in Myanmar resulted from passionate students participating in politics. Students’ involvement will always be crucial in strengthening and adapting Myanmar’s democratic system and contributing towards a better future system. Their role and reputation as change agents will be sustained in the future of Myanmar.

The participants were divided into two different groups of focus group discussion groups and in-depth interview groups. Likewise, the questions were also divided into two different sections for each group.

The 60 participants were from Myitkyina University, Government Technology College (Myitkyina), Teacher Training College, Kachin Theological College and Seminary, Monyin College, Government Technology College (Monyin), Bamaw College, Government Technology College (Bamaw), Government Technology College (Putao), and the Nursing and Midwifery Training School.

### 3. Methodology

For this research, a qualitative research design and purposive sampling method were used to study the political awareness, opinions and perceptions of university students from Kachin State on Myanmar’s political trends. To collect data from participants, in-depth interview and focus group discussion methods were utilized. The participants were political activists, youth leaders, students who are representatives of a particular class and university, students who are interested in politics and other students who are not very involved in politics.

## 4. University Students and the Status of their Participation in Politics

### 4.1. Discussion among university students

Communication is a daily activity for human beings. Within a group or between individuals, we prefer to discuss the issues that draw our attention or a subject that is familiar. We receive several benefits like language proficiency, knowledge exchange, friendship, and self-confidence by communicating with others. Thus, it is important to explore what kind of topics are on the top list of discussion among university students, the future leaders of the country studying at university within Kachin state.

Within Kachin state, university students' daily conversation in their free time includes various topics like fashion, sports, games, job opportunities, dating, movies, education and politics. Conversations on trendy things are also currently popular among them. Most commonly students talked about popular stuff currently happening, nothing serious, but something that went viral among their community.

Students compared universities from capital cities like Yangon, Mandalay, and their local universities, and then they realized that they were far behind in every

aspect. Then conversations evolved to a discussion about lack of equality, strong centralization, lack of stability within the state, political party movements, and other political matters.

Another hot issue discussed among students is job opportunities. Limited job opportunities is a big obstacle and challenge for students. The research team found that during the conversation students try to analyze the root cause of limited job opportunities, whether it is the mismanagement of government, consequence of ongoing civil war or unqualified education.

Authorities take action on politically active students who openly discuss political matters. They are subject to imprisonment, torture, and expulsion from universities; at worst, they can lose life and property. It is very troublesome, causing students hesitation to discuss political matters. The consequence of discussion on political matters lessens the discussion on politics. There is no free platform for students to discuss about political-related topics at any university. Thus, for students, discussing about political-related topics is dangerous and becomes out of their reach.

This kind of restrictions pushes away the new generation of students from politics in daily life.

## ***4.2. Involvement in political movements***

For many decades to the present day, legitimacy issues are always controversial when concerning involvement in Myanmar politics. University students' involvement in politics is also facing many obstacles for decades. For example, whether university students should be involved in politics or not is a commonly repeated question among citizens. It is quite an important question to be answered.

Some of students may not have connections to politics, but they admire and are proud of those students who are involved in politics. If they do not have the chance to participate in activities, they directly or indirectly support and encourage those taking actions.

For decades, involvement in politics has been regarded as one step away from imprisonment for students,

as there are existing laws to suppress students' participation in politics. There is an extensive record of imprisonment and punishment by successive governments for those students who take part in politics. Findings from this research show that there is immense respect for those students who are taking parts in politics despite the risks.

Discussions and recommendations from university students are also important for Myanmar politics, and it is also a kind of involvement in politics. University students believe that to initiate meaningful political movements with balanced perspectives from youth and elders, people in positions of power (elders) should recognize and listen to youth inputs and recommendations within political parties and other organizations. During political movements, university students were used as pawns and did not really have a chance to participate meaningfully. Some of the students strongly believe that given the situation, they are the generation to sacrifice for a better future, not the generation to benefit from the current situation.

## 5. University Students and Political Awareness

### 5.1. Political stance of university students

How university students within Kachin state understand politics is also an important factor for a democratic administration.

In both modern Myanmar history and politics, there are many examples of university students playing important roles. One respondent expressed that students should participate in politics as they have a great capability, but should not act like extremists.

The current political culture of Myanmar does not favour youth taking parts in politics and people in positions of power do not welcome newcomers, authorities do not trust youth and there is a lack of mutual respect. One respondent expressed their frustration regarding involvement in political matters in the current situation.

University students should try to understand the basic principles of politics even though they do not have the chance to join in political movements. According to D. Sunshine Hillygus (2005) argument

Undeniably, the fundamentals of education are important. Democratic citizens need some minimal understanding of the political system in which they express preferences and elect representatives to know even basic information like when and

where to cast a ballot. If individuals cannot read, it is difficult to fill out the ballot or to write a letter to their elected representative. (p. 27)

Students should join in political movements in teenage years to gain practice, and later they will become more experienced and knowledgeable in politics. In order to speed up the democratisation process and effectiveness, students need to learn about democracy in school. Practising a political system without educating the public will create space for a group of people who understand the system to exploit it and it might lead to chaos across the country (Yoldaş, 2015).

The university students request the ministry of education to put basic principles of democracy in the curriculum and teach civic education in schools. The students doubt that the human rights principles will have a full effect on us if we were not taught about human rights in school. If the government really cares about citizens and has the political will to implement democracy, they should start teaching about human rights and democracy at schools.

However, there were some widespread ideas that politics is not related

to university students. Many students firmly believed that students should focus on study, fully abide by the rules of the school, should not bring political matters to school and that politics is not a thing for

students. This is negative for the country, especially while the country is still under a process of building a democratic system and practices.

## 5.2. Current Administration System and Democratisation

The Myanmar administration system is in the process of changing from a military junta to a democratic system. The democratisation process continued in 2020, but it cannot be denied that there are still many areas for improvement. Restricting freedom of speech and intimidation of active students, by the government, lecturers and professors from universities, and authorities are deeply problematic. The constitution grants freedom of speech for every citizen, but it does not apply in reality. The actions of police and their beliefs are also contradicting rule of law concepts. University students assume and believe that police are not there to protect them, but to monitor activities and take actions against them. Weak implementation of the rule of law also adds many questions and mistrust of the current government. The national economic management of the current government directly affects students, teachers and parents. Inadequate teaching aid at schools undermines effective learning and practice. Students are frustrated by mismanagement of teachers that rather care more about maintaining

teaching aid materials than actually using it in teaching. Zoltan Barany (2017) criticized the economic management of current administration as follows:

Decades of military control of the economy has turned Myanmar into a desperately poor country. In 2016 its per capita GDP was about 1,300 US dollars, less than one fifth of neighbouring Thailand's. Reforming the economy is arguably the NLD government's most critical task. Surprisingly, it waited until late July 2016 to present its first major economic policy statement. The document turned out to be more of a general outline that identified neither policy instruments nor specific objectives to achieve within a given time frame. Some critics called it little more than a wish list. Its twelve points related to different policy areas touching on virtually all sectors of the economy. (p. 4)

Elections that directly involve the public are the crucial to a functioning democracy. Voting in elections is the backbone of democratic structures and is a basic right of the citizen in a democratic

system. Individuals or groups of citizens able to elect representatives on their free legitimises their rights to self-rule (Kühne 2010).

To have free and fair elections and to exercise voting rights without restrictions is still a standing issue in Myanmar. Another challenge in Myanmar's democratisation is the inadequate understanding of democracy among the general public. The military junta is to be blamed for the inadequate understanding of democracy and lack of awareness amongst the public. They have deliberately shaped the education, religious and social activities, and thinking patterns of citizens. This situation is a consequence of inadequate efforts in civic education and awareness raising.

Civil rights are an important element of democracy, and it is crucial that civil rights are not violated in any form. Only after citizens of Myanmar fully realise the benefit of civil and political rights, will democracy more fully benefit people in Myanmar, and the government will receive increased trust from the public. However, it is difficult to accept that the government of Myanmar is trying to improve civil rights and political rights for its citizens. Many university students have little idea about human rights, fundamental rights, citizen rights, civil rights, elections and similar areas. All these are effects of the military dictatorship's strategy to brainwash multiple generations.

## **6. Challenges, Obstacles, Chances of Involvement in Politics**

### ***6.1. Pressure from multiple entities***

Support and collaboration from university students in politics is a crucial element in implementing a democratic system as articulated by Abraham Lincoln "democracy is the government of the people, by the people, for the people. But there will be no benefit for the public and state if the government, parents, various organizations or neighbours pressured

and blocked students' participation in democratisation." It is obvious that university students can't exercise freedom of speech rights in Myanmar for decades until now.

Pressure from university authorities and teachers are the most challenging obstacle for students to

participate in politics freely. University authorities question and pressure students who take part in any political movements. Students also need to sign confessions, and authorities deduct credit off their work, deny their enrolment and at worst expel them from school for life if they join any political movements. Such obstacles and pressure substantially limits the participation of students in political movements.

Pressure from parents also directly affects student participation in politics. Parents often do not encourage involvement in politics, nor permit attendance at public demonstrations. Such kind of limitations significantly reduces the participation of students in politics. University students could participate in political movements to some extent with agreement or understanding from parents and teachers after thorough discussions about the objectives.

Pressure from the surrounding neighbourhood is also a big challenge for students to freely participate in politics. Pressure and intimidation from the quarter administrator is a major factor that restricts student's participation in politics. Furthermore, the family members of the politically active students suffer socially and economically by the pressure and intimidation from the neighbourhood and authorities. Indirect pressure from authorities is also effective in preventing

students from participation in politics.

One of the biggest challenges for university students is their limited understanding of civic rights. Ignorance of civic rights encourages students to keep distance from politics and have misconceptions about politics. It is also the main course for the loss of interest in politics and deters active participation.

## ***6.2. Incidents from the past***

Many incidents happened in the past such as killing, torture, dismissal from the civil service or being forced to retire and expulsion from school by the military dictatorship. There was no freedom, especially related to politics and any kinds of criticism towards the military government. Many students and academics were sent to jail for seeking freedom and they lost their jobs. The military dictatorship has destroyed Myanmar's education systematically, such as not allowing educational institutions to open or establish for any reason, and changing the education system to how the military prefers. The master plan of the military dictatorship was to reshape and manipulate every possible field of life, such as education, culture, religion and race to strengthen the military rule over the country (Smith 1992).

Practices of the military junta



system still influenced the democratic transition, which can be seen in university administrations. University authorities still apply tactics from the military junta system to control students involved in politics. University authorities question and pressure students who take part in any political movements. Students also need to sign confessions, and authorities deduct credits, deny their enrolment and at worst expel students from school for life, if they join any political movements. For school authorities and teachers, who are the integral parts of the system, it is almost impossible for them to stand up for truth against the political order. There are many examples of them losing their job or titles, and life was destroyed for those who go against the political order. Teachers should also participate in politics, but as government staff, they fear losing their job. They don't want to take the risk. The popular belief of everyone who joins political movements is that they will likely end up in jail.

After living under military dictatorship for several decades, it is sure that concepts and practices from the military dictatorship are embedded in public consciousness. It will be challenging for the public to forget the incidents they have been through. When it comes to politics, the public still has frustration, fear and trauma from various incidents like losing life, displacement, losing property, multiple forms of torture and imprisonment for

anyone who joined in political movements that criticised the government.

The older generation of Myanmar does not want that vicious cycle to be repeated in the next generation. This is the main reason parents from Myanmar try every possible way to prevent their children from participating in political activities based on their bitter past experiences.

Lack of civic education for several decades and still ignoring the importance of civic education in the education sector limits the understanding of civil rights among university students. The lack of discussion and teaching civil rights in educational institutions is one reason for the current inactivity of students in politics.

### ***6.3. Interpreting the rule of law***

According to Brian Z.Tamanaha (2012) the meaning of rule of law is as follows:

The rule of law means that government officials and citizens are bound by and abide by the law. This definition requires that there must be a system of laws and law by its nature involves rules set forth in advance that are stated in general terms. A particular decision or an order made for an occasion is not a rule. The law must be generally known and understood. The requirements imposed by the law cannot be impossible for people to meet. The laws must be applied equally to

everyone according to their terms. There must be mechanisms or institutions that enforce the legal rules when they are breached. (p. 233)

However, in Myanmar, the rule of law does not work like other democratic nations in the world.

For the public and students to freely participate in politics, some laws need amendments to be more practical and enforced without discrimination. The rule of law situation in Myanmar is very weak as some articles from the constitution have a vague meaning, leading to many biased interpretations, lack of the concise interpretation of laws and peoples who take advantage of the loopholes. Students are highlighting that without amending the

2008 constitution, there is little chance to freely participate in politics.

The rule of law is still very weak in many sectors such as education and the economy. Students believe that the government prioritizes the public, but they grab masses of land at their will, and the government doesn't care about education and economics, and even suppress both.

The rule of law is fragile and full of uncertainty in Myanmar. There is no guarantee that citizens can exercise their basic rights with the 2008 constitution. For example, if students exercise their freedom of assembly and association, they get arrested. In practice, there are no civil rights for citizens, it is only written on paper.

## Conclusions and recommendation

Concepts and practices of the country's future leaders or university students are crucial not only for Kachin state, but also for the entire country. The reasons students cannot discuss serious topics is because students are not allowed to freely discuss the subject and topics they want, especially topics related to politics. There is too much influence from central government in the management

of universities, alongside poor education quality.

Participation from university students in politics is a crucial element in making democracy meaningful. Universities also set rules and policies to directly or indirectly control students' participation in politics and keep students away from politics. Restriction of the parent from participation in politics is also undermining

the development of democracy. Furthermore, neighbours and communities criticize rather than encourage and respect student participation in politics. The practice of criticizing students' involvement in political matters is inappropriate for a democratic society and must end.

Understanding of civic education among university students is worryingly low. Lack of civic knowledge is one of the main reasons students hesitate to participate in politics. To raise awareness about civil rights, civic education programs should be launched in schools, media, and other potential avenues. Enlightening the broader public would also increase participation of students in politics.

To have a meaningful democracy, the rule of law is also an essential component. Even Myanmar claimed to be democratic country (now under military coup), these research findings clearly point out that the rule of law situation in Myanmar remains fragile. Many controversial laws are still in force and bias in enforcing them. Administrative authorities use these laws to intimidate and suppress public and students rather than to protect them.

However, on the 1st of February 2021, the Myanmar military have made the unthinkable action under the command of General Min Aung Hlaing, who seized power and initiated a military coup.

Democratically elected leaders were arrested and detained, which made the people of Myanmar to protest against the military coup, with protests led by Generation Z. The democratic revolutionary movement against the military regime shook the whole country, which rapidly spread out and quickly increased political awareness and civic engagement among youths and citizens.

After more than 800 civilians, primarily peaceful protesters, were purposefully shot dead by the Myanmar military under General Min Aung Hlaing, the revolution-led by youth's involvement in politics faces immense challenges in changing the country. The movement has evolved from not only speaking out about the horrible actions taken by Myanmar military under General Min Aung Hlaing, but participating in other actions by organizing armed forces, named People's Defence Forces, against the military coup.

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Therefore, one additional research question guiding the current study was what role Christianity played in framings of the nonviolent approach of the KYM, particularly concerning the role of Christian Kachin ethno-nationalism in supporting or opposing the idea of nonviolent resistance.

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