



## **NEXT GEN.** **GLOBAL FRONTIER**

### **Next Gen. Young Leaders Essay Submission 2023**

#### **Myanmar's Youth: A Lost Generation?**

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##### **Introduction**

Myanmar, with a population of 55 million<sup>1</sup>, has seen military rule for 51 of the 75 years since its independence<sup>2</sup>. The Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military, is by far the most significant political actor, seeking to maintain territorial unity, and political stability. Its authoritarian nature is part caused by the historical resistance of Ethnic Armed Organisations (EOAs) that dot the borderlands of Myanmar, possessing strong centrifugal nationalisms driven by distinct cultures, histories, and religions. To date, there are 21 EOAs in conflict with each other and the Tatmadaw<sup>3</sup>.

Social democracy movements are a core youth culture in Myanmar's history<sup>4</sup>. In the aftermath of the 2021 military coup, many of Myanmar's youth (ages 15-35) called for a return to civilian government. However, the intransigence of the military in negotiating with civilians and the formerly ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) party, as well as its extreme clamp-down on anti-government activities, has stifled political change.

The return to authoritarian government has entailed significant losses to Myanmar's youth; resolving the issue requires the cohesive intervention of the international community in not only ending the physical conflict ongoing in Myanmar, but also in encouraging a shift in the nation's political culture away from militarism.

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<sup>1</sup> Myanmar Population (2023)—Worldometer. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.worldometers.info/world-population/myanmar-population/>

<sup>2</sup> Myanmar country profile. (2011, April 6). BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-12990563>

<sup>3</sup> Myanmar's military holds election talks with armed ethnic groups | Conflict News | Al Jazeera. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/1/7/myanmars-military-hold-election-talks-with-armed-ethnic-groups>

<sup>4</sup> Richard Paddock. (n.d.). Myanmar Coup: What to Know About the Protests and Unrest—The New York Times. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.nytimes.com/article/myanmar-news-protests-coup.html>

## Youth in the Fight for Change

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) was the primary way in which the youth resisted the coup. Led primarily by young professionals, it involved government workers refusing to work and carrying out street protests.

Social media was crucial in sustaining the movement, with more than half of Myanmar using Facebook by January 2021, with the platform being synonymous with the internet<sup>5</sup>. By utilising the wide reach of social media, youth protestors galvanised netizens from different backgrounds and effectively garnered international solidarity against the junta<sup>6</sup>.

For example, photos of Mya Thwe Thwe Khine, a 20-year-old protestor, were spread on Burmese-language social media<sup>7</sup>, prompting celebrities such as Thandar Hlaing to criticise her treatment and stood protestors<sup>8</sup>. Internationally, UN Women called on stakeholders to refrain from using force in response.<sup>9</sup>

However, under brutal crackdowns by the Tatmadaw, protests have begun to falter in scale and consistency. To escape reprisal from local authorities and to continue their struggle, many youths have turned to EOAs, forming “People’s Defence Forces” (PDFs). Over 300 of these PDFs have been formed since the coup<sup>10</sup>, providing military training to such youths<sup>11</sup> and carrying out attacks against junta forces regularly.<sup>12</sup>

## The Losses Faced by the Youth of Myanmar

The efforts of Myanmar’s youth in resisting the military government and striving towards a democratic society are undoubtedly noble. However, the price they pay is immense. Today, the youth are particularly affected by the aftermath of the coup in three main areas: 1) basic human rights, 2) disruption of education, and 3) loss of economic opportunities.

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<sup>5</sup> The Role of Social Media in Myanmar’s CDM: Strengths, Limitations and Perspectives from India – NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS). (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-role-of-social-media-in-myanmars-cdm-strengths-limitations-and-perspectives-from-india/>

<sup>6</sup> The Role of Social Media in Myanmar’s CDM: Strengths, Limitations and Perspectives from India – NUS Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS). (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.isas.nus.edu.sg/papers/the-role-of-social-media-in-myanmars-cdm-strengths-limitations-and-perspectives-from-india/>

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Giles & Jack Goodman. (n.d.). How did the shooting of Ma Mya Thu Thu Kaing happen? BBC News မြန်မာ. Retrieved July 23, 2023, from <https://www.bbc.com/burmese/burma-56053590>

<sup>8</sup> ယုဂြူတန့်. (2021, February 10). “My children sympathize with the girl who was shot,” said Thant Hlaing (Translated). <https://burma.irrawaddy.com/lifestyle/entertainment/2021/02/10/237878.html>

<sup>9</sup> Montira Narkvichien. (n.d.). UN Women calls upon all stakeholders to listen to the voices of women in Myanmar in response to political events | United Nations in Myanmar. Retrieved July 23, 2023, from <https://myanmar.un.org/en/111487-un-women-calls-upon-all-stakeholders-listen-voices-women-myanmar-response-political-events>

<sup>10</sup> Human rights in Myanmar Amnesty International. (n.d.). Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/myanmar/report-myanmar/>

<sup>11</sup> Matthew Tostevin. (2021, April 27). Youths in black: Myanmar protesters train to fight junta | Reuters. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/youths-black-myanmar-protesters-train-fight-junta-2021-04-27/>

<sup>12</sup> Zay, A. (2023, March 15). People’s Defence Force attacks Myanmar army base in junta capital. Myanmar Now. <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/peoples-defence-force-attacks-myanmar-army-base-in-junta-capital/>

### ***Restriction of basic human rights***

Under the rule of the State Administration Council led by General Minh Aung Hlaing, civil rights have been severely curtailed and human rights infringed. According to Amnesty International, the freedom of expression, assembly, and association has been affected by the intensification of surveillance. For youths, a misstep or suspicion could lead to their arbitrary detention, joining more than 13,000 people still detained as of 2022.<sup>13</sup>

Censorship and rolling blackouts amongst rural communities, coinciding with military incursions have prevented the collection of evidence of human rights abuses in the region<sup>14</sup>. The police and military are reported to have killed at least 2,300 individuals and conducting systematic abuses such as extrajudicial killings and torture<sup>15</sup>. Military attacks on ethnic regions have also resulted in the indiscriminate deaths of many children. An estimated 1,376,000 individuals have been displaced as of March 2023 since the coup.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Disruption of education***

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the NLD government closed schools and attempted to facilitate nationwide virtual learning. Plans to reopen schools in 2021 were thwarted by the coup, where the CDM inadvertently caused school closures and politicised the issue of education<sup>17</sup>. Reprisals of some of the 300,000 teachers who participated have resulted in the relocation of educators out of fear, with the intimidation of both students and teachers severely affecting turnout.<sup>18</sup>

Internet blackouts prevent virtual education from being conducted, with fears that such actions would “risk long-term damage to efforts to build up the country’s university system and connect scholars and students with peers”.<sup>19</sup>

Today, only 22% of eligible students from 17-19 are enrolled, with an overall 12% fall in enrolment rates from 2017 to 2023 according to the World Bank<sup>20</sup>. Additionally, the rise in military attacks raises safety concerns for schools in

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<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International. (n.d.). Human rights in Myanmar. Amnesty International. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/south-east-asia-and-the-pacific/myanmar/report-myanmar/>

<sup>14</sup> Myanmar: UN experts condemn military’s “digital dictatorship.” (n.d.). OHCHR. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/06/myanmar-un-experts-condemn-militarys-digital-dictatorship>

<sup>15</sup> Manny Maung. (2022, November 3). In Post-Coup Myanmar: ‘Death Squads’ and Extrajudicial Killings. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/03/post-coup-myanmar-death-squads-and-extrajudicial-killings>

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR. (2023, March 13). Myanmar Emergency Update (as of 6 March 2023)—Myanmar | ReliefWeb. <https://reliefweb.int/report/myanmar/myanmar-emergency-update-6-march-2023>

<sup>17</sup> Now, M. (1 C.E., November 30). Myanmar schools reopen without students. Myanmar Now. <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/myanmar-schools-reopen-without-students/>

<sup>18</sup> San, S. (2021, June 16). Beyond the Coup in Myanmar: Don’t Let the Light of Education Be Extinguished. Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org/76921/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-dont-let-the-light-of-education-be-extinguished/>

<sup>19</sup> San, S. (2021, June 16). Beyond the Coup in Myanmar: Don’t Let the Light of Education Be Extinguished. Just Security. <https://www.justsecurity.org/76921/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-dont-let-the-light-of-education-be-extinguished/>

<sup>20</sup> Reuters & Michael Perry. (2023, July 19). Myanmar’s education system in “crisis” as rebellion rages on, says World Bank. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/myanmars-education-system-crisis-rebellion-rages-says-world-bank-2023-07-19/>

minority regions due to presence of EOAs.<sup>21</sup> With the lack of teachers, willing students and online alternatives, Burma's youth risk growing up to become less skilled than their parents, severely harming their economic potential and social mobility in the country.

### ***Loss of economic opportunities***

According to the World Bank, Myanmar's economy shrank by 18% in 2021<sup>22</sup> and FDI in Q3 2023 is 80% lower than it was in Q1 2021<sup>23</sup>. A significant cause of this decline is due to the lack of confidence from international investors and buyers, who are not only deterred by the political instability but also by the economic sanctions placed on the state by the US, EU, UK, Canada, and Australia.<sup>24</sup> Businesses in the high-growth construction, garments, tourism, and hospitality industries have been hit particularly hard since the coup<sup>25</sup>.

Moreover, the CDM and subsequent fears of reprisal for participation in the protests, especially amongst PDF members, leads to the lack of desire for the youth to economically reintegrate within urban centres. Formerly industrial workers in garment and construction, of which many are youth, must now settle for unstable and low incomes within their rural hometowns.<sup>26</sup>

Combined with the current low rates of education, Myanmar's youth will continue to suffer economically in comparison with their time under democratic reform<sup>27</sup>, when average GDP growth stood around 7%<sup>28</sup>.

## **The Need for Cohesive Global Action**

### ***Short-Term Goals***

Cohesive global action should aim to achieve the following short-term goals:

1. End the ongoing ethnic and political conflicts in Myanmar;
2. Cessation of all human rights abuses;
3. Ensure the proper provision of necessary aid to affected peoples;

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<sup>21</sup> Presse, A.-F. (2022, September 21). Myanmar junta attack on school condemned as child death toll rises to 11. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/21/myanmar-junta-attack-on-school-condemned-as-child-death-toll-rises-to-11>

<sup>22</sup> The World Bank. (n.d.). Economic Activity in Myanmar to Remain at Low Levels, with the Overall Outlook Bleak. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2022/01/26/economic-activity-in-myanmar-to-remain-at-low-levels-with-the-overall-outlook-bleak>

<sup>23</sup> Zan, H. H. (2023, June 8). Foreign Investment in Myanmar Plunges 60% on-Year in First Quarter. The Irrawaddy. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/business/economy/foreign-investment-in-myanmar-plunges-60-on-year-in-first-quarter.html>

<sup>24</sup> Myanmar Sanctions: What You Need To Know. (n.d.). ComplyAdvantage. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://complyadvantage.com/insights/myanmar-sanctions/>

<sup>25</sup> International Labour Organisation. (2021, July 19). ILO estimates reveal heavy job losses in the first half of 2021 in Myanmar [Press release]. [https://www.ilo.org/yangon/press/WCMS\\_814686/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/yangon/press/WCMS_814686/lang--en/index.htm)

<sup>26</sup> Frontier. (2021, April 1). Leaving Hlaing Tharyar: Factory workers flee city for uncertain future. Frontier Myanmar. <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/leaving-hlaing-tharyar-factory-workers-flee-city-for-uncertain-future/>

<sup>27</sup> Steiner, A. (2021, April 12). Myanmar's youth demand their future. The Strategist. <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/myanmars-youth-demand-their-future/>

<sup>28</sup> Myanmar GDP Annual Growth Rate—2023 Data—2024 Forecast—1994-2022 Historical. (n.d.). Retrieved July 23, 2023, from <https://tradingeconomics.com/myanmar/gdp-growth-annual>

4. Granting of amnesty to all youths who participated in the Spring Revolution, to allow continued employment and education.

Currently, the actions taken by the UN, Russia and China, ASEAN, and Western states have been inadequate due to the disparities in stances and methods to pressure the military government to change its policies.

Most importantly, Russia and China have enabled Myanmar's military rule through the continued economic and military support of the country. For China, its Belt and Road Initiative involves the \$9 billion construction of the Muse-Mandalay railway, incentivising it to continue supporting the isolated military government<sup>29</sup>. Both Russia and China have been accused of providing fighter jets used to strike civilian targets<sup>30</sup>, and consistently veto resolutions concerning the Myanmar crisis in the UN, hindering the efforts of the international body.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, ASEAN attempt to negotiate with Myanmar using its "five-point consensus" has failed to change the military's behaviour despite General Min Aung Hlaing's agreement to it. In fact, the junta harshened its clampdowns in the days following the consensus.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the attempts by the US, EU, UK and other western countries to curtail the junta's economic links through natural gas, metals, gemstones and timber exports have severely fallen short due to the lack of cooperation from other nations. For example, several Japanese, Korean and Singaporean corporations continue to conduct business with military-owned entities.<sup>33</sup>

The importance of external stakeholders lies within providing a check and balance on the military government that is currently lacking. To provide the necessary disincentives for ethnic conflict and human rights abuses, the international community must coordinate their efforts. Particularly, Russia and China must be held accountable for the continued support of the military government.

Moreover, aid must cease going directly through the junta, with humanitarian assistance instead going through humanitarian assistance corridors through

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<sup>29</sup> Yang, B., Swe, T., Chen, Y., Zeng, C., Shu, H., Li, X., Yu, T., Zhang, X., & Sun, L. (2021). Energy cooperation between Myanmar and China under One Belt One Road: Current state, challenges and perspectives. *Energy*, 215, 119130. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.energy.2020.119130>

<sup>30</sup> Reuters. (n.d.). U.N. Myanmar expert says junta using new Russian, Chinese arms against civilians | Reuters. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/un-myanmar-expert-says-junta-using-new-russian-chinese-arms-against-civilians-2022-02-22/>

<sup>31</sup> Sebastian Strangio. (n.d.). China, Russia Again Veto UN Statement on Myanmar Conflict. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://thediplomat.com/2022/05/china-russia-again-veto-un-statement-on-myanmar-conflict/>

<sup>32</sup> Human Rights Watch. (n.d.). Myanmar: ASEAN's Failed '5-Point Consensus' a Year On | Human Rights Watch. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/04/22/myanmar-aseans-failed-5-point-consensus-year>

<sup>33</sup> Manny Maung. (2023, February 6). Myanmar's Junta Benefits from Weak International Response. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/06/myanmars-junta-benefits-weak-international-response>

Thailand and India, as is currently done in Kurdish Syria<sup>34</sup>. By doing so, the international community can effectively prevent abuse of resources against Myanmar's youth.

The granting of amnesty to the youth is key to allowing them back to classrooms and workplaces. Fears of reprisal against protestors and PDF members persists due to continued arrest and killings; genuine amnesty will help to assuage such fears and dampen continued economic instability.

### ***Long-Term Goals***

International actions should aim to achieve the following long-term goals:

1. The return of Myanmar's political system back to a democratic path with reduced military interference;
2. Even and non-discriminatory economic and social development between the central region and minority regions;
3. Strengthening of Myanmar's civil society, including youth-led organisations and movements.

Admittedly, the military will likely continue to remain a key player in Myanmar's politics. Therefore, encouraging a return to democracy ironically requires their consent and a power-sharing agreement akin to the 2008 Constitution, reserving 25% of parliament seats for the military<sup>35</sup>. By far, the strongest incentive for providing democratic government comes from the rapid economic development that it previously achieved through higher rates of FDI as well as economic efficiency from loosening control over key markets and disruptive technologies such as social media, where Facebook contributed heavily to economic activity once the technology was widely available after democratic reforms<sup>36</sup>. Therefore, careful international economic isolation against the junta would incentivise democratic reform for the sake of performance legitimacy.

Yet a permanent end to ethnic conflict necessitates performance legitimacy amongst minorities as well. As such, even economic development across Myanmar, through policies such as special economic zones, is necessary in keeping the economically weaker minority regions<sup>37</sup> allegiant to the central government. In conjunction with democratic representation, it acts as a viable means of appeasing minorities without the need for conflict, ending the

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<sup>34</sup> UN. (n.d.). UN chief welcomes Syria decision to open aid corridors | United Nations in Türkiye. Retrieved May 1, 2023, from <https://turkiye.un.org/en/219072-un-chief-welcomes-syria-decision-open-aid-corridors>, <https://turkiye.un.org/en/219072-un-chief-welcomes-syria-decision-open-aid-corridors>

<sup>35</sup> Myanmar 2008 Constitution—Constitute. (n.d.). Retrieved July 23, 2023, from [https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Myanmar\\_2008](https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Myanmar_2008)

<sup>36</sup> Roache, B. (2018, January 16). What Myanmar's Facebook supremacy means for business. Frontier Myanmar. <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/what-myanmars-facebook-supremacy-means-for-business/>

<sup>37</sup> Toshihiro KUDO & Satoru KUMAGAI. (n.d.). Policy Review on Myanmar Economy "Two-Polar Growth Strategy in Myanmar: Seeking 'High' and 'Balanced' Development." Institute of Developing Economies. Retrieved July 23, 2023, from <https://www.ide.go.jp/English/Publish/Reports/Brc/PolicyReview/08.html>

vicious cycle that fuels narratives of victimisation and reinforces distinct nationalisms<sup>38</sup>.

Lastly, financial and diplomatic support towards youth-centric organisations from the National Union Government, National Unity Consultative Council and other CDM groups should be increased to allow for a greater internal and international recognition of the influence that such groups possess. Even though most of Myanmar's population consists of youths<sup>39</sup>, much more could be done to involve youths into the peace process. After all, youth engagement within political processes, especially between the different ethnicities of Myanmar, is key to allowing the peace to last<sup>40</sup>. By giving youth pro-democracy groups a greater base of support and resources, they will have a greater ability to enact change within their nation.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, the lost potential of the youth stands a chance to be regained if the country were to embrace its democratic values once again. Yet, their efforts, losses and sacrifices will continue to compound unless the military government willingly transitions the nation back on its democratic path. The outlined long-term goals are key to achieving a peaceful, united, and prosperous Myanmar, built on the efforts of its youth. The achievement of such a dream is at the discretion of the international community and its combined willingness to act.

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<sup>38</sup> Hein, P. (2018). The Re-ethnicisation of Politics in Myanmar and the Making of the Rohingya Ethnicity Paradox. *India Quarterly*, 74(4), 361–382.

<sup>39</sup> Population Pyramids of the World from 1950 to 2100. (n.d.). PopulationPyramid.Net. Retrieved July 23, 2023, from <https://www.populationpyramid.net/myanmar/2019/>

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Finnigan. (2019, August 23). Youth key to success of peace processes: Myanmar's stalling democracy and the fight for youth voice in political decision-making. *South Asia@LSE*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2019/08/23/youth-key-to-success-of-peace-processes-myanmars-stalling-democracy-and-the-fight-for-youth-voice-in-political-decision-making/>