

# Factors of Resilience and Constraint in the Myanmar Resistance Movement

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The year 2021 was marked by frequent military coups in some parts of the Global South. Democratic decline and backsliding have in general been a rising trend in recent years, but the coup in Myanmar marked a full return to dictatorship and showed what the collapse of democracy looks like. In a global retreat of democracy, regional institutions like the African Union (AU) and the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) are taking multilateral restrictive measures to oppose the unconstitutional attempts to seize power. Despite international pressure, the Myanmar military's actions against the will of its own people suggest that authoritarian-led democratization can soon be reversed, once a democratic experiment designed by authoritarian elites fails to yield an intended result (Ye Myo Hein 2022). Conversely, a taste of democracy which lasted only a decade is driving millions of Myanmar citizens towards a revolutionary fight against the dictators. This paper investigates the trajectory of Myanmar's revolution in the light of Arjun Appadurai's five dimensions of globalization, which are comprised of ethnoscaping, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes. It argues that multi-layered interactions in all five 'scapes' added some extra layers of resilience to the newfound mass political awakening and unprecedented resistance to the military coup. Likewise, these intertwining processes enable the junta to preserve its "Khaki" or "military capitalism" (McCarthy 2019, 1–2) and allow a shift towards digital authoritarianism for a fascist resurgence. Members of the resistance are aiming to end the hegemonic military rule in society as well as fascist thoughts vehemently fuelled by the military's propaganda, but how close they are to their objectives remains questionable one year after the coup.

## Myanmar's People's Resistance in Light of Appadurai's Five Dimensions of Globalization

Since independence, Myanmar has experienced a coup d'état three times. In the previous coups of 1962 and 1988, the military quickly quashed the resistance through arrests, forced disappearances, and persecution. In 1962, the public did not loudly object to the Revolutionary Council led by General Ne Win as the media remained "non-committal on the end of Nu's cabinet" (Taylor 2015, 256), which was then a democratically-elected government. Many leading politicians of the incumbent government were then also arrested (Win Tint Tun 2007), a tactic which was repeated in 2021. Additionally, when the 1988 uprising occurred, the signs of revolt were not as widespread as in the nationwide protests of 2021. Compared with past political awareness, the sheer scale of resistance was in stark contrast to what the junta expected, as they later admitted (Irrawaddy 2021a). For example, *Nway-u*, or Spring Revolution, is a new national movement (Bynum 2021) named after the first month that marks the beginning of *Nway* (spring) in this monsoon region of Southeast Asia (GlobalPost 2011). Mass participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) is claimed by the activists as an effective strategy in showing defiance against the military power. People took part in various forms of CDM including banging pots and pans, peaceful street demonstrations, labour strikes, consumer boycotts against the military's industries, withholding the paying of taxes and bills, non-participation in social and religious gatherings arranged by law enforcement bodies, and so on. At the peak of the demonstrations in February and March of 2021, 22 million people took to the streets (Goldman 2021).

Suppressing the resistance, the State Administrative Council, which was newly formed by the coup leaders, continued to impose its will on the people that a fresh election would be held within two years. This time, the politicians guess a new election will look like the one in 2010, in which the Union Solidarity and Development Party (a proxy of the military, USDP) was handed victory without any significant opposition. In forming an alliance with some 30 small political parties, the military has been trying to eliminate the legitimate role of the elected party of the last election, the National League for Democracy (NLD). Prompt actions were taken to prove the alleged voting fraud of the NLD and proposals were made to restructure the political landscape by introducing a proportional representation (PR) system. After being defeated in the last two general elections, the military is now convinced that the USDP cannot compete with the NLD's popularity and thus the best solution will be changing the electoral system. The first-past-the-post (FPTP) system enshrined in the 2008 Constitution turned out to be the wrong pick, and the military Union Election Commission (UEC), which is now in the pocket of the junta, started discussions on switching to the proportional representation system. However, it does not mean that the military will relinquish its permanent quota, 25 percent of

the total seats. The majority of Myanmar citizens object to the return of military rule and are pouring their support into insurgency groups, which were immediately founded as a fall-back option for urban protest. Within one year, the number of new groups that have been involved in guerrilla war all over the country has increased to 462 and local data analysts estimate that approximately 35,000 members are waging war (Burma Monitor 2022). Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) which represented nearly 40 percent of the marginalized ethnic-minority population<sup>1</sup> are trying to seize the moment for strengthening their autonomy; there is however no common strategy. Many of them joined the side of the National Unity Government (NUG) in exile to build a central command for defence, while some are still in the position of waiting and seeing before forging a strategic alliance with either side of the war (ICG 2022).

Since March 2021, thousands of citizens have chosen armed struggle, aiming to put the military atrocities to an end and to develop a common future with various ethnic groups—probably in a newly-defined territory. Armed resistance was indeed not an unfamiliar strategy as Myanmar has seen a different generation of armed resistance especially during the peak of communist insurgency in the 1960s and again during the founding of the students' army after the 1988 uprising. Notwithstanding historical experience, the 2021 resistance seems to have some new enabling factors that have increased citizens' openness to revolutionary ideas and actions. The country's experience during the years of reform featured a new reconfiguration of society which resulted in movements of people, things, and ideas in different aspects of globalization. This sort of mobility can be better explained within the framework of the five 'scapes' coined by Appadurai (1990, 296). It should be stressed that the disjunctive and unpredictable nature of the five dimensions—ethnoscapes, technoscapes, ideoscapes, financescapes, and mediascapes—can help to induce a social climate that gives birth to a brand-new generation of revolutionaries. Nonetheless, it would be wrong to imply that Myanmar is free from the dark side of the kind of global cultural flow that Appadurai mentioned.

Appadurai defines 'ethnoscape' as the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live. Such a shifting population appears to affect the politics both within a country and between countries to an unprecedented degree. In his view, 'technoscape' refers to the global configuration of ever-fluid technology, and movements of technologies across national boundaries. A 'financescape' is

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1 There are 14 provinces in Myanmar. Seven provinces, known as regions, in central Myanmar are populated by Bamar (also known as Burmans) which is the biggest ethnic group of the country. The other seven provinces, known as states, belong to seven major ethnic groups: Kachin, Karenni, Karen, Chin, Mon, Rakhine, and Shan.

a financial landscape that allows for the movement of currencies, capital, and securities both within national borders and transnationally. In a 'mediascape', we see the flow of images of the world involving many "complicated inflections" through different types of production mode, audiences, and the interests of the owners. Finally, 'ideoscape' is defined as a concept related to the "ideologies of states and the counter-ideologies of movements oriented to capturing state power or a piece of it" (Appadurai 1990, 299). In the early stages of revolution, the impact of global cultural flow that is embodied in Appadurai's notion of 'scape' has a profound impact on the people's participation. Movements of people, things, technology, capital, and ideologies across national boundaries have to a large extent benefitted the people's resistance strategies. The following discussions will highlight how the trajectory of the Spring Revolution is influenced by the flows of the five 'scapes'.

## Ethnoscapes

The presence of a Myanmar diaspora across the world is a key factor that complements the forming of domestic resistance. Because of deep poverty at home, emigration from Myanmar grew rapidly in the last three decades. Persecution, landlessness, unemployment, and dispossession of land back home are key reasons for citizens of Myanmar to leave for neighbouring countries and beyond. Although emigration had mostly been concentrated in the ethnic-minority provinces of border areas in the 1990s, it has been spreading to the whole country in the last decade. Many Myanmar people are becoming climate refugees as agriculture no longer offers favourable jobs in the villages of Central Myanmar and the lower part of the Irrawaddy Delta due to the changing weather patterns and frequent incidences of natural disaster. Neoliberal agrarian reform, which sped up after the opening-up of the country, also resulted in a higher degree of landlessness, and foreign remittances have been a survival income for many families (Borras et al. 2020, 20). In 2018, approximately 3.1 million people from Myanmar officially lived outside of the country (Akee and Kapur 2017, 3). Since the coup, Myanmar migrant workers and diaspora communities in various parts of the world have been channelling both moral and financial support back to the resistance movement, although COVID-19 is still another struggle they are facing (Nachemson 2021). Taking advantage of regional proximity, Myanmar migrant workers in Thailand and Singapore often organized monthly donation activities (AAC 2021). Local representatives are also appointed to take care of collecting money in different counties. With the help of social media, these kinds of self-help groups can expand their networks in their respective countries. Similar networks of Myanmar diasporic communities in Europe, the US, the UK, and East Asia are working voluntarily to raise funds that either go to the NUG or are directly distributed through local contacts that link up with recipient communities. In addition to fundraising activities, diasporic com-

munities are also active in advocacy for Myanmar's struggle in the foreign media and directly engaging with policymakers in the host countries regarding support for Myanmar's democracy. While this new politics is taking shape, the members of the exile community—who had to flee the country because of their political activism and participation in different resistance movements—have also contributed to the mass movement. The effort of diasporic communities bore fruit in some cases as they were able to put the Myanmar issue on the international stage through sanction advocacy and cultural activities (Cabot 2022). Back in 1988, Myanmar diasporic communities were almost non-existent in many parts of the world and domestic revolutionaries could hardly expect substantial financial support of the kind recently seen in the mass purchase of NUG bonds from Myanmar nationals abroad. Crowdfunding among the diaspora has been a major source of funds to fulfil the needs of the internally-displaced people as well as weaponry for the revolutionaries. In recent months, the military junta's State Administration Council (SAC) has been targeting the Myanmar diasporic community with threats to withdraw the passports of high-profile dissidents among Myanmar communities, while at the same time attempting to persuade other citizens to come back to the country (Dziedzic 2021). The spirit of self-sacrifice among individuals and collective solidarity in enduring intimidation and repression is the foundation of success in any revolution. Although struggle back home is not an issue which is 'out of sight, out of mind' for the Myanmar diaspora, it is also critical for them not to fall for the usual dictatorship tactics which aim to bring the diasporic communities over to the side of the SAC by bribing, dividing, and co-opting the diasporic opposition forces (De Mesquita, Bueno, and Smith 2011).

## Technoscape

Since reintegration with the international community back in 2011, Myanmar had seen rapid changes in mechanical and informational technology. New technological changes are seen by the military as the 'breeding ground' of the rebels. In comparison with past dissidents, the young generation nowadays are hard to control as they are often more familiar with technology which plays an essential role in modern-day living. In previous democratic uprisings, it was easier to silence the domestic voices as it was only necessary to enforce print censorship and stop leaflets and posters from being distributed in universities—which were usually the centre of protest—and on the main streets. In the 1990s, before the internet was introduced, the army's textbook strategy to control all communication devices was simply to control ownership of fax machines and satellite receivers for television. Now one can imagine the impact of the dramatic rise in imported technologies in a rapidly-integrating society. In comparison with the printing machine of the old days, a modern-day smartphone has the capacity to disseminate a message many times

faster; on the other hand, it has also served the purposes of hatemongers targeting ethnic minorities in recent years. For the resistance movement, tech transformation offers a better means to cope with authoritarian methods of deterring public mobilization. At the peak of the protests, the mobile data cut imposed for days did not stop protesters from gathering, as they could still receive messages via different kinds of encrypted messages coming through peer-to-peer mesh networks or Bluetooth services. Since 2014, Myanmar has had ‘leapfrog’ growth in mobile phone penetration and there were 69.43 million mobile connections in Myanmar as of January 2021. The number of internet users dramatically increased from less than 1 percent of the population in 2012 to 53.1 percent of the population (23.65 million) in 2021. It is not surprising to see the surge of social media users, which reached approximately 29 million (Phyo Thiri Lwin 2021). All these figures demonstrate how technology can contribute to the revolutionaries’ call for action. It also brought a generation who are ready to challenge the military rule with tech solutions in providing counterstrategies. However, the increase in internet users cannot be automatically interpreted as an increase in digital literacy. In a networked propaganda society (Benkler, Faris, and Roberts 2018, 1), sadly misinformation and disinformation are often applied as weapons by all warring parties to differing degrees (Rao and Atmakuri 2021). A quote which is popularly attributed to US Senator Hiram Johnson is one which is still relevant to the Myanmar battlefield of today: “in war, truth is the first casualty”. Still, one of the resilience factors of the revolution is the volunteerism of tech experts who are willing to give tech advice to the NUG and activist communities. Digital security tools are important for the activists to protect themselves from the state-sponsored cyber-attacks<sup>2</sup> when a series of new apps and games are also invented by tech volunteers for various revolutionary purposes—from fundraising and building CDM networks, to scouting and consumer boycotts.

## Financescape

The improvement of banking in Myanmar was prioritized for public service reform and gained attention from international financial institutions. In the circumstances surrounding the coup, Myanmar has seen a dramatic decline of banking services because of a brief participation of banking staff in the CDM, and later because of restrictions imposed by the Central Bank to reduce the amount of withdrawable cash—not only at the bank but also at ATMs. The subsequent crisis in the financial sector killed public trust in the banking sector, although the banks forced

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2 Anonymous interview with representatives from a technical support group to the revolution, virtual meeting, 21 October 2021.

their staff to return to the workplace. Because of the past experiences in three periods of demonetization—in 1964, 1985, and 1987 respectively—traditionally the Myanmar population has lost trust in saving cash and prefers to invest in gold or property. Only in the last few years could the bank attract more customers as the 2008 Constitution guarantees that the state shall not demonetize the currency that is in legal circulation, according to Section 36 (Myanmar News Agency 2021). However, as the coup itself provided evidence that the military was no longer respecting the Constitution, public trust in government and private institutions dropped overnight and the likelihood of a run on the banks appeared imminent for several weeks. Finally, the banking sector did not collapse as expected, but even by 2022, it had not returned to normal functioning. Yet, it is still a larger sector than the Myanmar banking of the 1990s.

Around the uprising of 1988, there were only four government banks, while no private bank was allowed to operate since the nationalization of private banks (including foreign ones) happened in 1962. Financial transactions across borders were possible only for those who had official income in foreign countries or export-import companies. Myanmar citizens could not use international financial services such as Visa or Mastercard until 2014, and the gradual introduction of ATMs in different cities was only introduced after 2011. Thein Sein's administration (2011–15) decided to allow citizens to receive foreign remittances through private banks. However, with the introduction of online banking and digital purse services in the last five years, people can now move their money more easily than ever. Until the bank crisis caused by the coup, four state-owned banks, 27 domestic private banks, and 13 foreign banks were operating in Myanmar (GIZ 2021). The use of digital payment services, which were newly introduced in 2016, has grown dramatically, with one survey noting an increase from one percent to eighty percent of users within four years (Salai Tun Tun 2020). Fluid financial exchange among the people is considered a threat by the military who want to control transactions and stop people from channelling resources to any resistance groups or individuals. Nevertheless, fundraisers attempted more creative ways to avoid the freezing of accounts, interrupted flow of financing, and seizing of financial assets. Numerous tactics for generating funds for the war are being employed including adopting cryptocurrency, crowdfunding, establishing social media click-to-donate platforms through streaming videos, or simply running grocery stores. The NUG shadow government also introduced a new kind of digital lottery after the people started to boycott the military-run lottery. Some initiated raffle tickets for international sales and later people started buying the revolution bond of the NUG. These are cross-border sales and tickets were mainly purchased through the Myanmar diaspora abroad and their trusted domestic networks. Regardless of user controls and unreliable services, it is impossible that the government can trace every transaction that is involved in funding the anti-junta insurgency.

## Mediascapes

The flow of news and information across borders and cultures has been significantly changing society in the last ten years. Before the pre-printing censorship was lifted in 2012, all media outlets were supposed to submit manuscripts to the Press Scrutiny and Registration Division (Fuller 2012), which was then known as the 'butcher of the news'. Censors working under the Ministry of Home Affairs or the Ministry of Information were assigned to scrutinize every line and paragraph, and to block all content which was deemed to harm the interests of the ruling class or to express the views of the dissidents. In those days, it was common that the voice of the foreign press was quickly silenced as foreign correspondents who were critical of the new regime were hardly allowed to report on events in Myanmar. By telling lies to the international community, the military government could hide the real picture on the ground. In 2021, it was harder to hide the local events from international scrutiny as the internet has broken the barrier between foreign journalists and local correspondents. At the local level, a new form of networked media ecosystem has recently emerged and this enables smaller regional media outlets to work together to share inputs and provide effective news distribution channels. In comparison with the state of access to information in the aftermath of the coup in 1988, people certainly have greater access to reliable news and a diverse range of views nowadays. In 1988, the military's suppression of the social movement's media was harsh and diminished all significant opposition voices within the first month of the coup. This kind of curbing of media freedom is no longer feasible in 2021. Nevertheless, the coup leaders are still enthusiastic about telling their version of truth to the public, but the 'official' narrative of the state-run media reports are mocked by anti-coup members of the public through the use of memes on social media platforms.. A decade of freedom without pre-printing censorship seems to have been sufficient experience for the people to see the function of a more pluralistic media landscape. The popularity of digital media outlets, which are largely operated in a clandestine manner, and a dramatic rise in the number of followers are indicators that both the news media and the readers show defiance against the military's censorship and propaganda.

## Ideoscapes

Enlightenment worldviews such as freedom, rights, equality, representation, and democracy are embodied in the slogans of the movement as they were pronounced in 1988. However, this time, the meanings of these slogans have become more penetrating in both rural and urban lives. To a large extent, the recent expansion of civil society has played a key role in widening space for discursive forums around values and ideas. The role of civil society organizations (CSOs) became more vi-

brant after 2008's Cyclone Nargis demanded an increase in contributions from NGOs and opened the door for the wider participation of local activists and organizations in the humanitarian—and later in the development—sector. The interconnection between Western versions of NGOs and traditional civic organizations in Myanmar became more intensified, although the NGO approaches were often criticized as lacking an in-depth understanding of the local situation, as well as for lacking effectiveness and accountability in their activities. Nevertheless, Myanmar to a certain extent benefitted from the expanding space for debate and discursive culture. In parallel with Western donors' initiatives for public education on human rights, democracy, and civic values, many public intellectuals, organizations, and labour and student unions also sought alternative ideas to counteract neoliberal shortcomings (Bello 2018, 64) brought about by the new government's development agenda. After nascent democratic reform was disturbed by an ultranationalist movement sponsored by the military and Buddhist monks that led to a series of incidents of sectarian violence in 2013, many local groups started to deliberate upon ideas for social justice, human rights, and pluralistic values in society. With constant pressure from the successive governments, their attempts were neither strong nor influential enough to prevent the Rohingya crisis in Rakhine State, nor discrimination in other ethnic-minority areas. Yet, many started to seek out local collaboration and external technical support through expanding networks to ease the right-wing pressure. There were times and opportunities for local groups to promote the importance of the ideas of human rights and human dignity as well as to learn from past mistakes and shortcomings in the face of the complexity of the ultranationalist movement. In 2021, the resistance movement received intellectual input from a collective of activist organizations and human rights defenders which had been working in a range of social justice issues before the coup. Many leaders of the resistance movement came from activist backgrounds, and they were well positioned to use existing networks accumulated throughout the reform years. Some of them had been engaging in anti-racism campaigns, rights for ethnic minorities, environmental justice, protecting human rights, promoting democracy education, and so on, thus 'knitting together' different layers of society.<sup>3</sup> A form of ideological alliance among activists, educators, the CDM, labour unions, politicians, and ethnic-minority leaders later emerged which would be utilized in any future federal democratic country under a newly-drafted Federal Democracy Charter (CRPH 2021). Naturally, all these de-territorialized transformations occurred to the above five dimensions in a way that was disjunctive, undirected, and non-linear (Hannigan 2002).

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3 Interview with a leader from the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN), 30 July 2021.

## The Flow of Global Interconnectedness and Recent Impact on the Coup Leaders

When it comes to the impacts of globalization, authoritarian governments in many Southeast Asian countries have, for their own survival, embraced different features of interconnectivity within the five ‘scapes’ (Morgenbesser 2020, 3–4). In Myanmar, the military—which claims to be the custodian of the state—is at the centre of this aforementioned “fundamental disjuncture between economy, culture, and politics” (Appadurai 1990, 328). The transformation of the five ‘scapes’ serves to sustain the authoritarian leaders’ legitimacy and authoritarian power by acquiring new techniques for silencing political opponents. The opening-up of the country after 2010 provided the military with more opportunities to enrich themselves from the greater global economic and technological interconnectedness, while ‘khaki capitalism’ would provide reliable resources for their attempts to steer towards ultra-nationalist ideological dominance (Kironka and Peng 2021, 16).

## The Military’s Silencing of Opposition by Taking Advantage of the Changing Ethnoscape

The coup had resulted in a dramatic increase in the movement of people especially in ethnic-minority areas. The number of internally displaced people in Myanmar has doubled to 800,000 (UN News 2022). After the military killed over 1500 on the streets and arrested another 10,000, many had to flee to the EAO-controlled areas. When the coup happened, the people’s resistance near and far has shaken the ethnopolitical landscape as the country started to question where they stand in terms of the revolution. According to Appadurai, ethnoscaping “appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree” (Appadurai 1990, 297). Under these circumstances, the people begged the EAOs to stand together with the revolutionary cause; many accepted, while others remained committed to neutrality. To reduce the momentum of the resistance, the military leaders have been wooing EAOs while attacking the NUG’s legitimacy. The military seems to know how to exploit the existing ethnoscape within the territory of Myanmar and the emerging movement beyond the border.

Throughout the troubled history, ‘divide and rule’ is the main successful strategy of the army, as it exploits social cracks in ethnic-minority communities. While they allow the pro-ceasefire ethnic-minority elites to exploit natural resources, they continue to undermine the rights of other ethnic minorities who confirmed their continued resistance to the military power. Despite the mediation of foreign organizations such as the Nippon Foundation (Asahi Shimbun 2021) and assistance from the Thai Government (Bangkok Post 2021a), its intended ceasefire never ap-

peared to make sense. In the past, the divide and rule tactics of the military proved effective in slowing down the process of unifying all ethnic minorities to build a federal state. Ardeth Thawngmung (2021) reminds us that Myanmar's National Unity forces—now winning the support of a majority of the Myanmar population, representing over 60 percent of the population—must overcome the divide and rule tactics of the military. The military has been repeatedly trying to persuade ethnic-minority groups by means of diplomacy through inviting them to bilateral meetings, and official commemorations and ceremonies. However, its heavy-handed practices on the battlefield in areas controlled by EAOs are showing that its propaganda, which promises a more inclusive future for the country, is not genuine.

Buying the support of the EAOs by means of a 'carrot and stick' policy, the military anticipates that the emerging rebel forces led by the NUG can be crushed in a short time and the planned fresh election will provide a result which is to the military's liking. In November 2021, the military's Union Election Commission met with over 50 political parties to convince them that proportional representation would be a legitimate way to strengthen Myanmar's democracy, although the NLD and some influential ethnic-minority parties including the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) were not included. It is believed that now 30 out of over 90 political parties in the country are sided with the junta's rule and their plans for the upcoming election (Irrawaddy 2021b). However the junta's goal to hold an election as planned in August 2023 is unlikely to succeed, provided stability and order cannot be established (Bangkok Post 2021b). The discontent of ethnic minorities with the military does not mean that the NUG is now closer to winning the wholehearted support of all ethnic-minority parties. The NUG, which inherited the reputational risk of the NLD after Aung San Suu Kyi had failed to form an alliance with ethnic-minority groups, is now struggling to convince the ethnic-minority leaders of the sincerity of its enthusiasm for a federal democratic system.

For the hardcore of the armed forces involved in the war, such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), Karen National Union (KNU), the Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF), and the Chin National Defence Force, capitulating to the Tatmadaw (the Myanmar military) was not recognized as an option. Open dialogue with the NUG resulted in a more collaborative central 'command and control' system at a national level, although recent attacks by the military increased the numbers of refugees and resulted in villages burned to ashes. Networks of the Myanmar diaspora and stronger cohesion among all kinds of ethnic minorities across the country have certainly built value-based solidarity for the first time in history. However, it should also be noted that the military has rich experience in the game of divide and rule and is still seeking measures to keep its enemies divided.

## The Military's Technoscape Advance: Intense Competition in Virtual and Real Battlefields

In the war with old and new insurgent groups, the military is trying to gain the upper hand, not only in the digital arena, but also 'on the ground' i.e. on the battlefield. The resilience of military rule rested not only on the coercive military might but also on the consent they could trigger in the state-society relationship. Since 2011, the Western world had opened the door wider for engagement with the Myanmar military. Its military-institutional power has been enhanced by different types of collaboration with foreign countries. For instance, while Australia had been supporting the training of Myanmar soldiers in non-combat areas (Stayner and O'Brien 2022), the National Defense Academy of Japan (HRW 2021) had been hosting Myanmar military officials for training in both academic and military courses including combat and arms training. Myanmar has been sending cadets to Russia for weaponry and cybersecurity training. Russia was the source of at least 16 percent of the weaponry procured by Myanmar from 2014–19 (Lukin 2021) and the collaboration has increased even more following the coup. As neither the Parliament nor the executive branch of the NLD government were able to challenge the military's systematic abuses in the last five years, Myanmar had been witnessing increasing violence against civilians even before the coup. Deepening militarization after the coup has led to a dramatic increase in violence with up to a 620 percent increase between 2020 and 2021 (Bynum 2022) reaching the highest civilian death toll from a conflict situation in the last 30 years (Myanmar Media Collective 2022).

Since the outset of war with the Arakan Army which started in 2019, it has been a recurring theme that full internet blackouts have been happening in the combat regions. Since the first month of the coup, the military has banned social media including Facebook and Twitter, and has been restricting web pages by imposing a China-style whitelisting of sites for the general populace. In addition, the SAC has been drafting a new cyber security law that will outlaw the use of VPNs, as seen in many other digital authoritarian states (HRW 2022). To shrink down civic space, the price of a SIM card was subject to a 20-fold increase, and mobile data was charged at a higher price than usual. For some years, the army has been preparing to enhance its online and mobile phone surveillance system by acquiring dual-use technology from Western countries. Even after the Western sanctions following the plight of the Rohingya in 2017, businessmen close to the military circle have in recent years been using their international networks to procure arms and equipment on behalf of the Myanmar military in deals worth millions of dollars. Although the military faced a great loss on the digital battleground, it is trying to defeat the resistance forces through the use of surveillance drones, hacking software, and phone-cracking devices.

## Control of the Financescape in a 'Four Cuts' Strategy

In countering armed groups, the coup leaders returned to the 'four cuts' strategy that was persistently applied in the communist counterinsurgency war of the 1960s. In a bid to stamp out the funding, food, intelligence, and recruits that are flowing to the People's Defence Forces, the army is destroying all possible logistical bases owned by civilians. Since the EAOs have limited capacity in terms of combat and logistical support for the People's Defence Forces, the rebels from different regions need direct support from the people, especially for buying weapons and ammunition. A crackdown on the flow of financial support to the rebels came to be effective when the banks chose to cooperate with the junta. Within a few months after the coup they started blocking the financial transactions of those they suspected of being affiliated with the resistance, and even reported these 'suspicious persons' to the security forces (Myanmar Now 2021). As most of the private banks are owned by cronies from military circles, the people do not have many choices, even though they wanted to boycott such services. Once bank accounts and digital wallets of potential donors and fundraisers have been frozen, it also means their personal security is greatly at risk.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the incoming remittance was also closely monitored by the military and a resurgence in the market of illegal remittance has increased the cost of transactions.

The need for fundraisers to be assessed for eligibility by the banks indicates that those who have gained access to capital have a large advantage when it comes to advancing the cause. Although the war has been fought under the leadership of two parallel governments, the weight is with the junta when one takes capital into account as a factor. Historically capital has never been distributed equally "across space and social groups" (Heyman and Campbell 2009, 145). Having unmatched institutional capacity, it is hard for people's movements to survive without a sustainable flow of financing. Hence, it is hard to neglect the fact that the financescape has been given a greater weight among the five 'scapes' and is a vital support for authoritarian resilience. When the NUG had to compete with a ruthless regime that can demand support from crony companies, the NUG itself could hardly manage to mobilize its financial resources in an authorized manner. As Josiah Heyman and Howard Campbell (2009, 140) contended, new patterns of cultural flows suggested by Appadurai should not obscure "new patterns of inequality, especially of political rights while in movement, an inequality that is likely to also affect class relations and social honor". Eventually, the level of risk exposure can also differ between the SAC soldiers and those from the NUG, as financial strength is at the core of formulating war strategies.

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4 Anonymous interviews with fundraisers, 1 September 2021 to 20 October 2021.

## Mediascape for the Dissemination of Far-Right Ideas

Since the coup, the SAC has been steering the ideological state apparatus towards fortifying “Burmanization” (Gray 2018) in a bid for legitimacy. As the military’s popularity has sunk to the lowest point in history, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing seriously needed to make efforts to maintain confidence especially within the army. While repeatedly justifying its brutalities as necessary for playing the role of ‘the guardian’ of the nation and its religion, the core of several speeches of the USDP and army leaders after the coup consisted of the sentiment that the “native Myanmar race, Buddhist religion and cultural identity” are under serious threat by foreign imperialism as well as Islamization.

To sustain its hegemony, Amresh Gunasingham (2019) argued that the Myanmar military has never been hesitant to draw on nationalism to boost its legitimacy through the intrinsic Buddhist majority in society. The military has been exploiting the *Saya-Dagar* (patron-client) relationship by associating with influential Buddhist *Sangha* (clergy) to strengthen its religious and cultural legitimacy. Activities around the pagoda and monasteries have gained more visibility in the media, while the NLD have been blamed for neglecting the Buddhist clergy community in the past five years. Since the NLD did take similar measures to the military, these accusations were unfounded and perhaps also a little ironic (Prasse-Freeman and Ko Kabya 2021, 1–2).

Observing the rise of far-right groups in Myanmar politics, Myat Thu (2021, 201) claims that Myanmar’s religious populism never shares the characteristics of left-wing populism. Left-wing populist strategy refers to a process in which politicians incorporate populist ideas as a strategy to address the struggles and demands of society in the name of the people (Venizelos and Stavrakakis 2020). Having a special focus on xenophobia and nativism, Myat Thu insists that the populism utilized by the military is primarily right-wing. When the NLD was dancing to the tune of military appeasement, its leadership failed to acknowledge the consequences of leaning in a far-right direction, especially when it came to dealing with the Rohingya crisis. The military’s far-right strategy is indefensible as they stress the continuing exclusion of some ethnic minorities based on their racial purity laws and policies. The perceived threat of a population explosion in neighbouring states was given as justification for restrictive immigration but mobilizing racist monks to preach hate speech has strayed far from the idea of sustaining Buddhist practices and culture as the ‘core values’ of society. In recent months, the military has been integrating ultranationalist groups into a ‘people’s militia’ strategy. Different brands of ultranationalist groups are being organized in the style of Mussolini’s Blackshirts, such as the Pyusawhti militia, to fight against the People’s Defence Forces as a paramilitary wing of the army (ICG 2021).

While hundreds of Pyusawhti and military informers are reportedly receiving military training and are heavily involved in tracing the hiding places of the opposition, many new media outlets sprang up from ultranationalist networks. Many of those who are now running the new media outlets and agencies used to work to mobilize the public in anti-NLD rallies in the name of protecting Buddhism. Regular reports on the military-run newspapers and social media channels are targeted at tarnishing the NLD's reputation by labelling them as pro-West, pro-Muslim, and acting as stooges for foreign countries while intentionally degrading Myanmar's culture and national identity. Given this combination of the far-right characteristics of the military regime, Jonathan Saha (2021) even observes that the military's "strategies deployed today recall fascisms past" in different places of the world, although it is still hard to locate Myanmar in the global history and critical discourse of fascism. Nevertheless, he insists "we must name it as fascist". Just as writers like Judith Butler (2017) justify calling Donald Trump a fascist, similar arguments could be levelled at Min Aung Hlaing's plans to move to the far right.

Even before the coup, the army already had a policy of using social media content generators to influence the views of the people. After the coup, the voice of the independent media was silenced. In addition to its monopoly on all branches of the state-run media, military-sponsored racist and anti-democratic content is being distributed widely through social media. The military propaganda agents are well-resourced financially,<sup>5</sup> while independent media outlets are dying as they lack adequate financial resilience, according to media analysts (Burma Monitor 2021). The Tatmadaw also forced their rank and file and associated family members to spread the assigned messages on social media, and even to make attempts to shut down free voices which go against the interests of the military (Reuters 2021). In general, the war makes social media another battlefield. No matter how the regulatory teams of social media companies tried to detect hate speech, through being reported by users, user-generated content during wartime is full of hate messages from every corner of the warring parties, as war—whether for a just purpose or not—is a display of anger. While many major media outlets are being criticized for inciting hate, the reasoning capacity of individual social influencers and public opinion-makers played an important role in shifting from a mob mentality to a crowd with wisdom. The destructive power of social media content cannot be underestimated after Myanmar witnessed the effect of the "We Stand With" campaign (Naw Betty Han 2019) around the time of Aung San Suu Kyi's trip to the International Court of Justice when a majority of the people declared their support for her (Prasse-Freeman and Ko Kabya 2021). The herd mentality in denying accusations

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5 On 23 October 2021, the SAC announced that they were providing a loan amounting to 15 billion kyat (7 million euros) to the film industry, writers, and media groups who were cooperating with them.

of genocide, killings, and the driving of Rohingya from their homes was later seen as shameful by many social media users, but the cost of ignorance means huge suffering for the Rohingya. Such political manipulation in social media platforms is probable at any time and it triggered a great concern among monitors of online content.

## Conclusion

The Myanmar military coup in 2021 marked a new chapter in the relationship between the military and the public. It is impossible to predict the outcome of the people's movement from the current setting of the ongoing revolution. Shifting the balance of power from the military elites to pro-democracy resistance groups is very likely, with a mass awakening in favour of democratic values and anti-racism. The Myanmar people's resistance highlights the fact that globalization fosters some enabling factors (as well as some obstacles) to the pro-democracy movement. Apadurai's theoretical perspective, the five 'scapes'—ethnoscapes, technoscapes, financescapes, mediascapes, and ideoscapes—together serve as an analytical tool to contextualize the effects of the flow of people, finance, technology, and ideas in the ongoing Myanmar revolution. The recent growth of interconnection between Myanmar and abroad energizes the resistance forces from all levels of society. It also creates favourable conditions for the ruling class by facilitating the military's pursuit of eternal supreme power. On the one hand, what will make this revolution succeed or fail is largely influenced by the persistence and tenacity of the Myanmar people living locally and abroad. On the other hand, the military leaders keep sharpening the army's skills, to allow them to play with modern tools and connectivity in order to sustain their ruthless authoritarianism. Upgraded military and information technology help the army to expand its combat capacity as well as its media campaign to scapegoat non-Buddhist, minority-ethnic, and minority-religious groups as part of a populist 'unifying cause' for Myanmar. No matter what the possible revolution's outcome is, it will take time to remove the roots of right-wing authoritarianism as the currently-growing branches gravely threaten the co-existence of different ethnic groups and the independence of the various regions in Myanmar. In a far worse scenario, if the military rule prevails, Myanmar is likely to stand as a breeding ground for new fascism. Alternatively, if civic insurrection can establish a full democracy, Southeast Asia will see that the awakening of the people is the fundamental determinant of the successful anti-authoritarian movement.

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