

ASEAN Youth Forum (Secretariat)
June, 2023



Myanmar's Youth After the Coup

A Primer



ASEAN Youth Forum (Secretariat) 2023

Myanmar's Youth After the Coup, *A Primer*

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Main Researcher

Ryan Febrianto

Assistant Researcher

Iqbal Hafizul Lisan

Editor

Astried Permata
Aliyah Almas Saadah

Layouter and Illustrator

Amanda

Written and published by

ASEAN Youth Forum (Secretariat)

Duren Tiga Barat VI No. 36,
Kalibata, South Jakarta
12760, Indonesia

www.aseanyouthforum.org

secretariat@aseanyouthforum.org



Preface

Many reports found the raising of anti-democracy, or in some cases, authoritarianism in this region. At the same time, the pro-democracy protest against the authority led by young people has upswing in recent years -- namely, the pro-democracy rally in Thailand and Myanmar. However, we are also concerned by the security and impact of government repression toward youth protesters.

Moreover, these days, we are facing one of the most concerning humanitarian crises in this region caused by the turn of authoritarianism, which is the return of military dictatorship in Myanmar. In times of crisis, building solidarity effort is needed more than ever, including cross-national solidarity.

Not solely the cross-national solidarity efforts needed to earn more support in strengthening youths in Myanmar but also to flourish activism dynamic in other countries. As often cited, 34 percent of ASEAN's population comprises young people between 15 and 34 years old. It is salient to pay attention to this young population to resist the anti-democracy and authoritarianism trends.

As a youth-led organization focusing on advocacy efforts, we also believe in the importance of data-driven advocacy in solidarity work. Thus, we are developing the primer to better comprehend the military coup's impact on young people's lives in Myanmar. We also envision this primer could serve as a reference to consider solidarity support to the Myanmar crisis, especially for young people.

Regional Coordinator of AYF Secretariat

Fatimah Zahrah

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Part 1

Why do we need this primer?

Introduction

The lives of Myanmar citizens have changed since the military coup that took place on 1 February 2021. In the two years since the military coup, the Myanmar military has carried out various restraints and brutal acts against anyone who resisted the military rule. Human Rights Watch (2023) noted that the junta security forces have committed various mass killings, arbitrary arrests, torture, sexual violence, and other abuses that amount to crimes against humanity, including restrictions on freedom of expression and association, including in digital spaces. UN agencies such as UNHCR have called the situation a “humanitarian emergency”, with at least nearly 2 million people reported to be internally displaced within Myanmar as of 1 May 2023 (UNHCR, 2023).

This military coup occurred in various regions in Myanmar, including military operations that occurred in areas with many ethnic minority populations, such as in Kachin, Karenni, and Shan States (HRW, 2023). Not only attacking adult civilians, crimes against humanity are also committed against children and young people. A report written by the UN Human Rights Council (2022) found that

the junta has arbitrarily detained over 1,400 children with at least 61 children currently being held hostage by the Junta. The brutal treatment of children included being beaten, cut and stabbed, burned with cigarettes, forced them to hold stress positions, deprived them of food and water, among others. The report also limited access to routine immunisations, nutrition, and access to education as short and long term impacts of the crisis. Unfortunately, not much information has been found on the impact of the military coup on the lives of young people in Myanmar to date.

The international community has placed special attention on the situation in Myanmar, with the issuance of the ASEAN Five Point Consensus in 2021 as well as humanitarian assistance towards basic needs and refugee responses. However, the international response is still seen as insufficient and even failing to protect basic human rights, such as the right to life (Amnesty International, 2023).

Young people have played an important role in supporting democratisation in Myanmar. Various media reports noted



the role of young people in leading and dominating protests during the military coup. However, their concerns about the military coup did not arise in a vacuum. Myanmar's long political history, starting from the period of independence from 1948-1958, then 1960-1962, followed by the people's revolution in 1998, then the military coup in 2021, has influenced youth unrest and their political agency. Thant (2021) notes that Myanmar's youth are less likely to accept deprivation, propaganda, oppression and social injustice, as they have experienced democratic change and political and economic liberalisation during childhood and adolescence.

The ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF) aimed to develop a research brief to investigate the impact of the 2021 military crisis on young people. This was explored through qualitative research involving key informants from Myanmar's youth, including exploring the changes in daily life experienced by some young people and what kind of future these young people hope for.



The purpose of this primer

Given the limited sources of information on the situation of young people after the military coup in Myanmar, this primer is written for readers who are concerned about the crisis in Myanmar and its impact on young people. As such, this primer is expected to:

- 1 **Inform about the situation** in Myanmar after the military coup, especially its impact on the lives of young people;
- 2 **Serve as a reference** for stakeholders, both governmental and non-governmental, in considering support or assistance to the crisis in Myanmar, especially to young people.

This primer is structured in a certain way, namely related to the background of the primer (part 1), the challenges faced by young people in Myanmar (part 2), stories about the daily lives of young people affected by the military coup in Myanmar (part 3), and recommendations based on the hopes and dreams of young people (part 4).

Methodology

This document was written by collecting primary data from several youth informants as well as a literature review related to the post-military coup situation in Myanmar. A qualitative approach was chosen to explore in-depth information, especially related to the profiles and daily lives of young people in the post-military coup context of Myanmar.

Data collection techniques were conducted through:

A Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

An FGD was conducted to explore information about the daily lives of young people and key challenges for young people, particularly in accessing basic public services. The FGD was conducted online on 24 April 2023, involving 7 participants (3 female and 4 male participants) selected based on AYF's network. The selected participants were young people with key criteria, including: (1) aged between 18 to 35 years old, preferably under 30 years old; (2) residing in Myanmar or outside Myanmar. For participants outside Myanmar, preference will be given to those who moved their domicile in/after 2021; (3) Myanmar citizens or individuals who have difficulties in acquiring/retaining Myanmar citizenship; (4) Connected to the internet and able to speak good (conversational) English.

The FGD key questions were divided into 3 main sections. They are (a) information related to the daily lives of the participants, especially after the military coup; (b) an exploration of the challenges, particularly regarding access to public services; and (c) aspirations and hopes for the future. The results of the FGDs were written down in field notes by the researcher and research assistant, thematically analysed (theme categorisation), and written up in this report.

B In-depth interview (IDI)

In-depth interviews were conducted with 3 (three) FGD participants who had important stories related to the impact of the military coup on the daily lives of young people. In-depth interviews were organised online for 60-90 minutes, involving the researcher and a research

assistant. The IDI questions were developed based on information that was felt to be incomplete from the information obtained in the FGDs, plus some follow-up questions related to the topics discussed.

Similar to the FGDs, the results of the IDIs were written in field notes, treated as additional data during thematic analysis, and then written in this report.

C Literature review

The literature review was conducted by reviewing a maximum of 15 (fifteen) key publications related to the situation in Myanmar after the military coup in 2021, especially those related to the changes and challenges of young people's lives. Young people are defined by combining the UN definition of youth and Myanmar's national definition of those aged 16–35. This literature review will explore preliminary information on:

The general situation of young people in Myanmar during and after the military coup. It includes the changes experienced in the daily lives of young people, particularly in relation to education, health, housing, employment, and protection from violence. It also covered challenges and needs of young people in Myanmar related to youth well-being.

The results of the literature review were collated in a database (Excel Sheet) based on the categories of information collected, and then written into this report.

In the data collection process, both for FGDs and IDIs, basic research ethics were applied, including the principles of confidentiality and security of data and personal information, meaningful and voluntary participation, the principle of doing no harm, and accountability of the research results to all informants involved. To ensure the safety and security of the informants, all informants' identities, such as their names and institutional affiliations, are written anonymously in this primer.

The study conducted for this primer has limitations that affect the results and interpretation of the data. Firstly, the data collection was conducted online and it was difficult to interpret participants' non-verbal expressions. Moreover, all participants were not comfortable turning on the video during the discussion for their security reasons. Second, the selection of participants was limited to AYF's youth network, which affected the diversity of characteristics such as geographical area (including urban-rural), age, educational and occupational background, and gender. Thirdly, the researchers are not Myanmar citizens (outsiders, as the researchers are Indonesian nationals), who do not have direct life experience related to the research topic. Fourth, the limited resources and time available for the study made it difficult to expand primary data collection. Fifth, there are limited data and research reports on the current situation of young people in Myanmar, so much of the sources of information are drawn from unofficial reports, media releases and Op-Ed articles.



Part 2

What are the challenges faced by young people in Myanmar?



Of the 54.6 million population based on 2023 data, young people make up a large proportion of the population structure in Myanmar (Subedi & Garnett, 2021). At least 25 percent of the population is aged 10-24 (UNFPA, 2023). Of this population, 5 million children and young people are among the poorest as measured by the wealth index quintile and 307,000 have at least one form of disability (Ministry of Labour, Immigration and Population Myanmar, 2014).

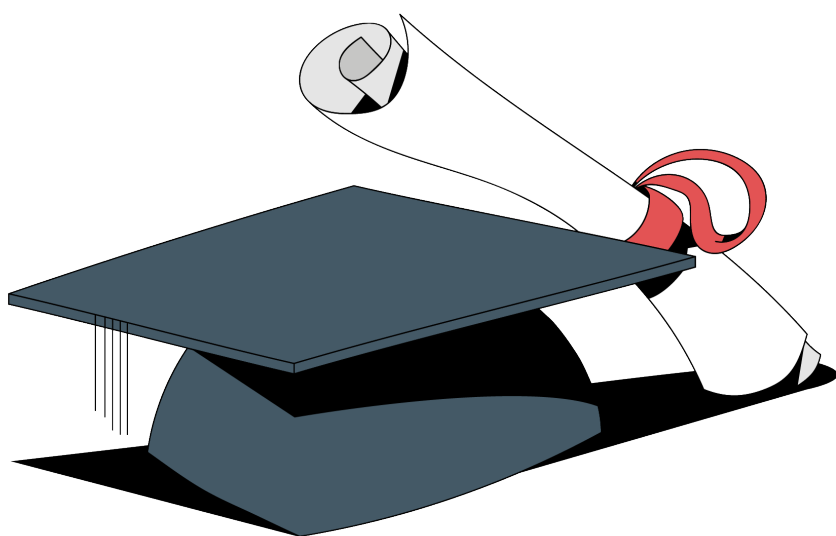
Before the military coup in February 2021, Myanmar's economic growth was one of the highest in Southeast Asia. In education, increased access to telecoms and internet connections gave young people hope for access to quality education in Myanmar (CSIS, 2022). However, the COVID-19 pandemic and military coup pose challenges to the quality of life of Myanmar's population¹, especially young people, in terms of access to basic services such as education, employment, health, shelter, and protection from violence.

This section will summarise the findings from the literature on these challenges, as well as what are the key challenges of basic services according to Myanmar's youth directly through FGDs.

Education

Key challenges:

- There are about 7.8 million children out of school in Myanmar (UN OHCHR, 2023).
- There have been at least 260 attacks on schools and school staff since the coup (UN OHCHR, 2023). In many cases, attacks on schools have been followed by the occupation of schools by armed forces, including as bases for military operations.
- At least 3.7 million children are not attending the military-run education system, with a significant proportion of education staff participating in the civil disobedience movement (UN OHCHR, 2023).



The military coup that led to the junta's occupation of Myanmar's schools segregated the education system between Junta-run and alternative schools operated by the National Unity Government/NUG and community-based schools. For young people in secondary education, this creates a particular challenge for them to take matriculation exams, let alone continue their education to the university level.

³According to The World Bank (2022), since March 2020, poverty is estimated to have doubled, with about 40 percent of the population living below the national poverty line in 2022, nearly a decade of progress on poverty reduction has been undone.

The military coup and the junta's occupation of schools led around 300,000 teachers and school officials to quit working in government-run schools as part of the Civil Disobedience Movement/CDA (RFA, 2023). Many changes occurred in the education curriculum under the influence of the military coup, in particular making education standards uniform at the national level. The junta mandated schools (especially public schools) not to teach democratic values, and asked schools to promote nationalism and patriotism to support the junta's political agenda. One informant added that international standardised curricula and SATs are also banned by the junta, in an attempt to eliminate alternative education.

Many schools are now understaffed, leading to dropouts, and there has been a significant drop in secondary school students registering for graduation exams (RFA, 2023). In response to this, many alternative schools have formed and are currently operating in the country. However, one informant mentioned that there is a quality gap between schools and even between classes within schools.

Many parents and students feel unsafe attending junta-run schools (BNI Online, 2021). Some FGD participants also mentioned that many young people are looking for ways to leave Myanmar and study abroad.

Another issue, according to an informant, is a brain drain among students who choose to leave Myanmar for education. A lot of students are leaving the country and most of them are choosing Thailand. After the coup, they tried to restart a new life by choosing a completely different

profession or major. Unfortunately, most of these students were faced with scams from the countries and institutions they went for. For example, in Thailand, an informant witnessed that a lot of institutions are exploiting students with expensive and repetitive fees.

A report from Channel News Asia (2023) mentioned that thousands of Myanmar students have fled to neighbouring countries to pursue their studies, in the two years since the military coup happened. According to this report, many refugee students who live in Malaysia find limited opportunities for education and work, due to a lot of influx of refugees into the country. Many fleeing Myanmar nationals also have no travel document, this makes it difficult to get a job or access public services in Malaysia.

An informant also mentioned that ethnic minority groups are the most vulnerable regarding access to quality education. Before the coup, the curriculum enabled education for ethnic groups using their own language to be more inclusive. Some community schools operating in border areas even taught the students using multilingual education. However, after the coup, the junta has its own education policy, especially in areas with a lot of ethnic minority groups². They make all the schools use only the national language, which makes all students from different or sometimes marginalised ethnic groups unable to participate meaningfully in the school. In some cases, those ethnic groups who still pursue an education under schools run by the junta have the potential to experience identity issues and crises because the system does not recognise their cultural background.

Employment

Key challenges:

- As of April 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic and military coup could push as many as 12 million people into poverty. This could lead to as many as 25 million, almost half of Myanmar's population, living below the national poverty line by early 2022 (UNDP, 2021).
- As a result of coup, The Socio-Economic Impact on Youth During Spring Revolution survey finds that about half of respondents (48%) are jobless and without income since the initial period of the movement while (11%) were jobless about a year later and a few (3%), were faced with unemployment more than two years since COVID-19 pandemic period (Ministry of Women, Youths, and Children Affairs Myanmar, 2022).

Young people complain that there are limited job opportunities for young people as many companies or organisations have closed their operations from Myanmar following the military coup. In the midst of this situation, many companies require a minimum of a high school or university education for job vacancies. This is difficult for young people as many of them did not take the graduation test and did not continue their education to university. Thus, labour issues are closely related to education issues.

Moreover, when job opportunities are available, many companies offer low wages to young workers. In many contexts, young people have no choice but to accept low-wage jobs. This unequal relationship between prospective workers and employers makes it easy for young people to be exploited by employers.

Working abroad, for some young people, may seem to be the most reasonable choice in the midst of these limitations. One informant further shared his experience of moving to Thailand in 2022. However, after considering the cost of applying for a multi-entry visa (given the need to travel multiple times to visit her family), she eventually did not choose to move to Thailand. In the midst of her decision-making confusion, she was informed that Thai immigration restricts Myanmar residents from migrating to Thailand, particularly for work.

² On 30 October 2022, the junta (via Myanmar Alinn Daily) announced changes to Myanmar's 2014 National Education Law (NEL), significantly weakening the linguistic rights of ethnic minority groups. This includes promoting Burmese as the sole language to be used in public schools. PEN International (n.d), an organisation working to protect and promote linguistic diversity condemned this considering Myanmar's linguistic diversity of over 100 languages and dialects, and the new policy can be seen as an attempt to undermine the ability of ethnic minority students to use their mother tongue in public schools.

Only people with student visas are allowed to enter Thailand. However, in many cases, she observed that there are a lot of people entering with student visas, but after the visa expired, they overstayed in Thailand illegally. This makes young workers potentially vulnerable to deportation.

For those who manage to work outside Myanmar, particularly in Thailand, young people face a situation where even the wages they receive are not enough to support a family living in Myanmar, due to the high inflation that is currently occurring, the price is rising. She gave examples, for internet connectivity, the package price was doubled in 2022. The power/electricity was the same and people can only access it 4 - 5 hours a day. The junta even made an announcement to companies that they have to stop the electricity services after 5pm. Because of that, if companies wanted to have services for 24 hours, they had to rent a generator.

This labour issue not only affects the situation of overseas migration, but also internal migration. One informant said that some of his friends who already had a diploma were forced to migrate out of town to follow the available job opportunities, at the same time protecting themselves amidst the ongoing conflicts. Most of them migrate to different areas, leaving central Myanmar where the armed group resides to avoid any conflict. In rural areas, many young people work in areas that do not match their educational background, for example in the construction industry. For young people, they no longer care about working outside their educational background, the most important thing is to get paid. Another informant mentioned that most of her friends who already had three or four years of education were forced to leave university and started to search for jobs in another area. According to her story, living in central Myanmar felt like living in different countries.

Health

Key challenges:

- From 2021-2022, the UN reported that attacks on health services continued alongside military operations. These attacks included arrests of health workers and delivery personnel, obstructed access to health care through the imposition of physical roadblocks and bureaucratic and discriminatory authorisation regimes, and confiscated and destroyed medical supplies (UN OHCHR, 2023).
- The military takeover of 1 February 2021 and, on the other hand, the Civil Disobedience Movement have severely impacted the health system and availability and accessibility of health services, from the highest levels in the Ministry of Health (MoH) to frontline basic health staff within the public sector (WHO, 2022).
- While provision of essential health care services in the public sector has resumed to a certain extent in some big cities like Nay Pyi Taw, Yangon, Mandalay compared to the early days of the military takeover, the overall access environment remains heavily constrained with a strong reliance on and risk transfer to low-profile local responders (UN OCHA, 2022).
- Young people complained about the lack of support for safe and affordable health services for young people despite many young people experiencing stress, depression and trauma due to the impact of the military coup.
- According to The Socio-Economic Impact on Youth During Spring Revolution survey, young people's mental health situation is deteriorating. Before the coup, there were only 3% with feelings of anger and brooding and to 4% with sadness or unhappiness: these cases jump into 36% and 48% respectively, while those feeling upset or sensitive went from 4% to 15% (Ministry of Women, Youths, and Children Affairs Myanmar, 2022).

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If the pandemic disease like COVID-19 hits again, Myanmar will suffer the most

- an informant from the FGD

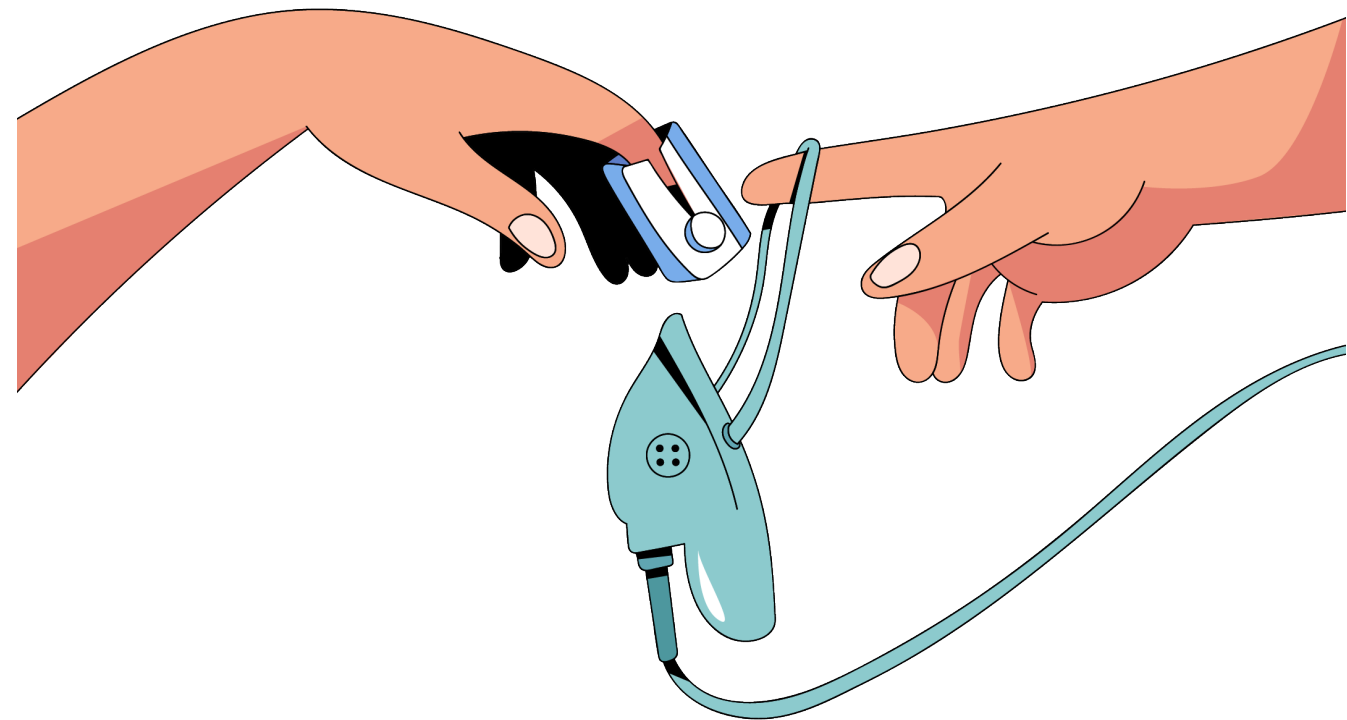
Young people complained about Myanmar's problematic healthcare system. In the context of handling COVID-19, according to young people, the junta began to politicise health services by spreading anti-vaccine propaganda to the public. Because of this, many of the population refused to get vaccines

and were worst affected by COVID-19. Moreover, the junta is not transparent about death data, especially due to COVID-19, to the public. This indicates a lack of transparency from the government regarding health data, leaving the public uninformed about who is most vulnerable to health disasters, and the risk factors associated with them.

Young people also mentioned issues around attacks by the military on health services, including health workers in areas managed by the National Unity Government (NUG) and Ethnic Revolutionary Organisation (ERO). Some of these attacks on health services were carried out by the Myanmar military based on suspicion that the management was supporting local resistance groups (Insecurity Insight, 2023). Insecurity Insight (2023) also wrote that the military also closed access to the supply of medicines and food to hospitals and areas, as well as attempted to damage medicines and

equipment in hospitals. This has made it difficult for people, including young people, to access health services in general.

Separately, a youth informant also emphasised the mental health issues experienced by young people due to changes in young people's daily lives and social relations, as well as the country's general security situation. Unfortunately, mental health services are still limited and only affordable for a small proportion of young people.



Housing

Key challenges:

UNHCR report (2023) finds that:

- 1,493,100 Internally displaced people after 1 February 2021.
- 53,200 People displaced to neighbouring countries since 1 February 2021.
- 328,000 people living in protracted displacement before February 2021.

Young people in this study mentioned challenges related to homelessness due to military operations in various areas, as well as limited internet services and power outages. This affects the daily lives of young people, especially those who go to school and work.

Some young people were concerned about the situation of people left homeless by military operations.

One informant mentioned that there are at least millions of people who have been displaced by the conflict. Not only that, young people also complained about the restricted access to electricity and internet, as well as the rising prices due to inflation. This has an impact on the daily lives of the society, especially young people who work and go to school online in the COVID-19 pandemic situation.

On the other hand, an informant mentioned that the military burned down nearly 60,000 houses in the centre of cities in Myanmar because they considered the people living there as supporters of the anti-military movement. Because of this, nearly 2 million people became internally displaced. In some urban areas, most slums were also suspected by the military of harbouring pro-democracy protesters, so the military also targeted these areas and carried out land grabbing. People were forced to move from urban slums to neighbouring areas.

Security and Protection

Key challenges:

- More than 1,700 people have now been killed, and more than 13,000 arrested since the military took power (Amnesty International, 2022).
- Authorities intensified both on- and offline surveillance, further diminishing the space for freedom of expression and severely restricting other rights including to privacy, information, association and movement (Amnesty International, 2022).
- Young people from this study complained about the difficulty of obtaining passports and other travel documents. In addition, many people were stopped and searched at random at numerous checkpoints in towns and cities throughout the country.
- The junta has further expanded surveillance efforts at various points in Myanmar's major cities. In 2020, Myanmar authorities installed the first phase of the surveillance system by installing 335 cameras in eight townships in Naypyidaw. These cameras are installed using AI technology that can scan faces and vehicle plates in public places and provide alerts to authorities regarding who is wanted (HRW, 2021).
- Authorities continued to impose periodic internet and telecommunications shutdowns, particularly in regions affected by armed conflict (Amnesty International, 2022).

On the issue of protection, young people were concerned about the safety of digital spaces for young people and the protection of young people migrating abroad.

For some young people, the experience of mobile phone checks and hacking from the military government is not unfamiliar. In addition, the military government often checks social media for counter-military government content and arrests those who upload such content. It is not uncommon for young people to hear of cases where the arrested party needs to pay a considerable amount of money to be exempted from arrest, or spend time in prison. As such, this creates fear and concern about the digital activities that young people can engage in.

“

Digital spaces in Myanmar are not safe and protected at all

- said one informant.

For young activists who assist human rights violation cases, there are also challenges. From his experience of assisting cases, an informant said that in rural areas, military groups view all young people as a threat, so they often arrest young people to be moved to barracks and torture them. The military coerced and threatened student activists and journalists to give testimonies that young people were the ones causing trouble during the protests, even though this was not the reality. In particular,

an informant who is active in providing legal support said that there is no legal protection for young people, refugees or internally displaced persons in Myanmar today.

Security risks are also experienced by young people living abroad, for example for school or work. According to an informant, Myanmar embassies in many countries are an extension of the military forces abroad, and they can exert similar pressure on citizens, especially young people who oppose the military. One informant gave the example that if a Myanmar student moves abroad and speaks out about the situation in Myanmar, and they are found out by the Myanmar embassy there, then the student will have problems. These problems can be related to issues of passport issuance, reprimands and even being forced to return to Myanmar.

For some young people in Myanmar, issuing a passport is becoming increasingly difficult. Moreover, the experience of ethnic minority groups to get a passport is also much more difficult than other Myanmar residents.



Part 3

What life is like for young people impacted by the military coup in Myanmar?

This section follows the life changes experienced by Thet, Wai, and Lwin³, three young Myanmar people who live in fear of risks to their health, education and welfare, and persecution by the military for their activism.

The military coup in Myanmar left young people with limited options for their future, even needing to migrate to other countries to further their education and careers. The sudden change in social relations and propaganda against young people from Myanmar's military government has an impact on young people's mental health. On the other hand, amidst young people's concern for the future of Myanmar, young people have a great fear of their activism, given the unsafe and narrowing space for civic participation.

Burying your dreams or choosing another life path: the choice of continuing education or working abroad

Thet (he/him) is a Myanmar student currently living in Hong Kong to pursue his undergraduate studies. Born into a middle-class family, Thet enjoys listening to music and watching concerts, especially classical music concerts. Before the military coup took place in Myanmar, there was no thought of studying abroad. Thet was an active student in high school, wanting to pass his high school exams and continue his undergraduate and postgraduate studies in Yangon, then work at a foreign embassy. Thet had to bury his dreams after the military coup, just like many young people in Myanmar.

³ For identity security reasons, the informants' names have been changed and other identities, such as the name of the organisation, place of residence, and campus/work affiliation are not written in this report.



The military coup made many young people bury their dreams, as did Thet. Thet shared that he had a friend who was a medical student who was starting a philanthropic startup. When the coup happened, his friend was expelled from the university, his business was unsuccessful. Now, he has to work odd jobs as a mobile rice seller. "Every young person in Myanmar got kicked out of their normal lives and completely became someone else", he said.

Not only struggling within the country, many of his friends crossed borders into Thailand and became illegal workers. Some of them from the upper middle class went on to study at university. Young people's life choices are limited between trying to graduate from high school and taking foreign university entrance exams, or finding a job. Moreover, in the absence of a diploma, many young people have no choice but to take up technical or clerical jobs.

“

I am completely lost

- he said.

When COVID-19 began to spread in Myanmar, Thet had just started studying at a university in Yangon, and the campus stopped operating due to the pandemic situation. In 2021, when the military coup occurred, Thet and his family thought that this situation would continue in the long run, so the family looked for ways for Thet to continue his education. With the security situation uncertain, there was no other option but to move abroad immediately. At that time, the options were limited. The family even had the option to move Thet to a western country and take up a blue collar job, until he

could return to university. Eventually, Thet enrolled in a college in Hong Kong and was able to continue his studies.

According to Thet, young people in Myanmar face tremendous difficulties when continuing their education abroad. Not only was it difficult to graduate from high school during the coup, but access to study and take SATs (Scholastic Aptitude Tests) in Myanmar was difficult. Passport processing is also challenging. In fact, according to him, only the upper-middle class can get access to education and English language tests as a requirement to apply to foreign universities. Credit transfer for intermediate and final semester students is rarely possible on Hong Kong campuses. Thus, according to him, his experience of moving to Hong Kong is inseparable from his privilege.

Further, Thet shared his concern regarding Myanmar youth who continue their education in the country. For young people who do not have the ability to study abroad, they have the opportunity to continue their education in Myanmar with low quality and security issues when schools are occupied by military personnel. In some military-occupied schools, learning and graduation periods are accelerated. In principle, it is easy to obtain a diploma in military-run schools. However, the quality of graduates is questionable, and there are now many companies that do not accept diplomas from military-run schools.

For some people, getting a degree abroad means that someone has to choose a new, different path. The same goes for Thet, when he came to Hong Kong, he had to choose a new academic pathway. This is happening to all young people in Myanmar who considered migrating to another country. For someone who was in a lower social class and considered working in Thailand or China, they will also encounter the same situation.

People who migrated in a large number for studying abroad is a new social phenomenon starting after the coup. Some people ended up in India to continue their education, even though the situation was completely different from what was advertised or promised in the first place. The university was very remote with low quality of facilities. In Thailand, both public and private institutions asked for repetitive money and ended up with programmes that cannot guarantee anything after graduation. Some get lucky like Thet who ended up in one of the top universities in the world, but his story is one in a million. The situation is also difficult in the university where Thet studies. The scholarship is very limited.

Thet shared that he experienced many difficulties during his studies in Hong Kong. He rarely contacted and interacted with his immediate family and other family members, as well as his friends in Myanmar. When he arrived in Hong Kong, everything felt unfamiliar and he felt like he was living in two different worlds. Everything happened very quickly. Thet

always had this question on his mind: *'I wonder if people like me really know what is going to happen, what we are going to do in life, and who we really are'.*

In addition, Thet also mentioned that Myanmar students studying abroad have not really managed to discuss their experiences of the coup, despite the fact that many students are aware of the trauma and pain caused by it.

Another issue pointed out by Thet was that many people are in favour of the democratic revolution, but at the same time they are all living under the influence of the military government. This makes social interactions among his friends very tricky and confusing.

When asked if he would return to Myanmar after completing his studies, he said, *"Helping Myanmar is a very privileged task if one is independent and brave. If one is not independent and has family responsibilities, then one will end up looking for a job"*. The dream of changing Myanmar becomes an elusive one.

Politics is personal: the impact of the military coup on young people's mental health

Wai (she/her) is a Myanmar postgraduate student currently studying in Thailand. For her, the military coup has had a huge impact on health, especially mental health for herself and young people around her. Realising this, Wai initiated a project to provide mental health services for young people in crisis areas.

Before moving to Thailand, Wai was a graduate student at a university in Myanmar. The military coup made her distrustful of the quality of the higher education system in Myanmar, and she looked for ways to continue her education abroad. Her experience of the military coup was a moment that made her lose many things, as she said, "Because of the coup, I lost everything, I lost my sanity, my loved ones, my education, my friends, and so on".

The military coup did not only have an economic impact on those affected, but also on mental health, particularly stress and depression. This is closely related to the daily lives of young people due to changes in Myanmar's education system and fear of security. Moreover, this is exacerbated by the changes in social relations, as many of Wai's relatives and friends have different political ideologies from her, specifically supporting the military government.

Wai stated that the military spread a lot of hate speech against young people in Myanmar. The military posts a lot of propaganda about young people on social media. Every time young people open their social media and see posts about hate speech, it triggers negative reactions, including fear, stress and depression. In addition, whenever young people try to seek professional help, they face challenges in accessing mental health services. The biggest challenge, according to Wai, is the high cost of accessing quality mental health services. While there is more affordable mental health-support through phone-line services, sharing personal stories through these platforms is considered unsafe for young people. There is a fear of the junta hijacking the service and getting information from young people.

From her experience, she used to not talk about her mental health problems to others because she knew that everyone else was going through the same thing. She tried to find ways to overcome her problems and improve her condition. Fortunately, Wai had the opportunity to attend a mental health awareness training, and she became more aware of mental health issues. This encouraged her to provide similar services, such as counselling and referrals for young people to access professional services.

Wai shared a story about a friend of hers who suffered from a mental problem. She could not sleep at night because she always had panic attacks. She always felt anxious whenever he read news about the brutality of military groups. Now, her friend's condition has improved. With Wai's help, her friend is accessing mental health services and taking medication regularly to help her situation.

Wai explained that Myanmar needs more support from international communities to conduct training programmes to provide mental health awareness and strengthen available mental health services. Such support is not only in terms of capacity building, but also in regard to providing funding for services. Wai mentioned that Myanmar's future might get worse, as inflation increases and civil wars take place in some areas, especially in some border areas. Therefore, ensuring the mental health condition of young people, particularly those who are more vulnerable, is crucial.



Young people: active in voicing pro-democracy but lacking protection

Lwin (he/him) is a young activist with a background in legal studies who actively promotes justice for vulnerable groups through legal aid and alternative education. Currently, Lwin is busy completing his thesis, while continuing to equip himself with information related to the political and human rights situation in Myanmar. In the midst of various issues that occur in Myanmar, especially limited access to quality education to the difficulty of fulfilling basic life needs such as electricity and internet, he has a concern for the protection of young people who are active in voicing pro-democracy.

Before the military coup occurred, Lwin was active on campus and initiated a campus organisation that provided legal education to young people, especially vulnerable groups who do not get access to legal justice. However, when the military coup occurred, military groups controlled all campuses, making it difficult for him to operate the legal education-based movement. After the coup, he started providing legal aid to pro-democracy activists in Myanmar. He helped 200 activists from being detained for their protests. Not long after, the military began targeting lawyers who provided assistance to young activists. Some lawyers, he said, were investigated and detained, making many other lawyers hesitant and afraid to provide assistance to young activists. The military government is also trying to amend policies that allow freedom of speech.

As such, it is difficult for lawyers to mobilise and openly provide legal assistance. Lwin is deeply concerned about the situation of more than 10,000 young people who remain imprisoned. He believes this is a violation of the fundamental rights of young people, especially the right to the freedom of expression, opinion and assembly.

For him, the young, or 'Gen Z', are the most active pro-democracy voices and are driving the revolution. Many of the very young activists formed unions to protest military rule, were involved in student organisations, and initiated protests against military groups in Yangon. They were also actively embroiled in trade unions and pro-democracy organisations. Because of these numbers and strength, the military groups targeted and attacked the youth.

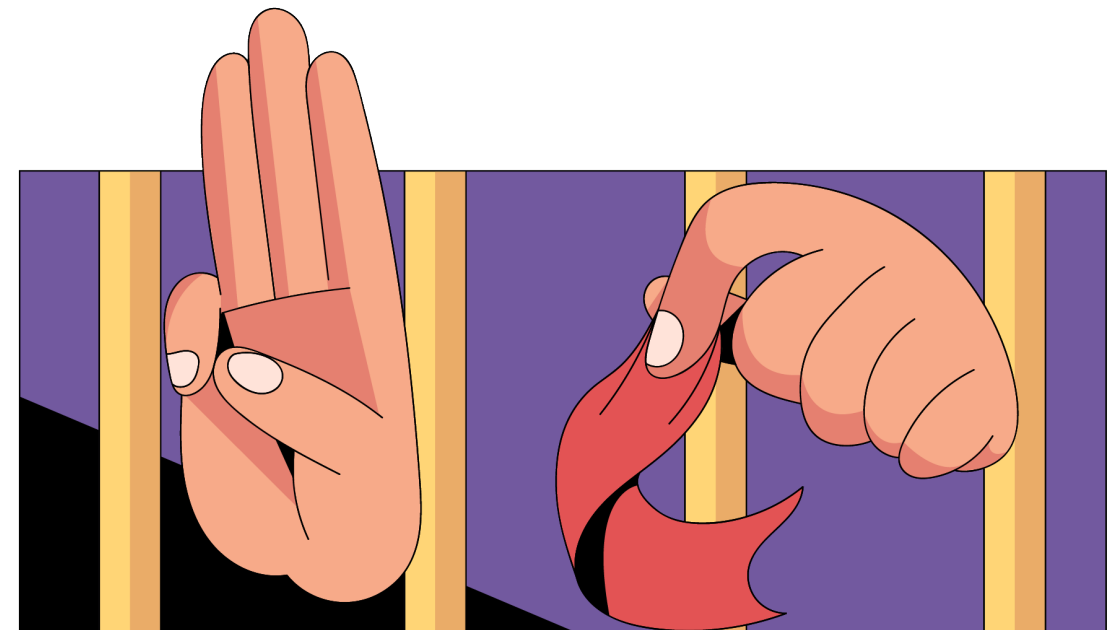
Further, Lwin shared his perspective regarding the most vulnerable groups. When it comes to young people who are vulnerable to persecution by the military for their activism, students and those involved in labour groups deserve special attention. Those two groups are targeted by the Myanmar military to be arrested and tortured. Besides that, the military also targeted other minorities based on religion, especially the Muslim communities. Muslim youth condition is at stake because the Myanmar military group is led by extreme/conservative Buddhist nationalists. The Myanmar military spread propaganda that Muslims are promoting Islamification and that caused the military

to justify their action in targeting the Muslim community. Youth activists then responded to this by raising the issue of islamophobia among military personnel. Additionally, the military also targets people based on their ethnicity. Therefore, youth with double minorities based on religion and ethnicity are the most vulnerable population.

According to Lwin, the future is uncertain after the military coup. He had witnessed a lot of protests and spring revolutions. But none of it brings any significant results. It is due to the power of the Myanmar military group and their responses to arrest, torture, and murdered young activists. Because of this situation, young people live in fear of investigation, hacking, repression, and murder by military groups. Restraint of expression is widely practised through monitoring activities through

CCTV, hacking social media accounts and activists' bank accounts. Many activists then choose to hide in rural areas and live with fear and concerning conditions.

Lwin mentioned that the military government also regulates the use of social media in Myanmar, which makes it difficult for young people to use social media as a medium of activism. When the military changes the law on personal conduct and privacy, it can interfere in the private sphere and arrest people. People can be arrested for three years under this law. Most state-owned media are now used by the military to spread propaganda and false information. Military groups are also trying to ban Telegram. They are watching every move of the young activists. At some point, when they try to arrest the activists, but fail, they will arrest the families to make the activists surrender.





Part 4

What are young people's hopes and dreams?

The unprecedented situation in Myanmar, particularly regarding the fulfilment of fundamental rights, leaves young people with few options to develop their full potential. These complex issues are difficult to address by civil society in Myanmar alone, and require better support from the international community, particularly the UN, ASEAN (and the role of neighbouring countries), and international humanitarian organisations.

Disappointed but hopeful: the role of ASEAN

The young people involved in this study expressed disappointment with the role of the international community, particularly the UN and ASEAN in promoting democratisation in Myanmar, and even the provision of essential humanitarian support to vulnerable communities. Despite the Five-Point-Consensus agreed by ASEAN, young people complained

about the lack of meaningful change, especially pressure on Myanmar's military government.

Participants specifically mentioned the failure of The ASEAN Summit in discussing and agreeing on concrete steps related to peace and democracy in Myanmar, even as the Myanmar military government is evidently committing human rights violations. Young people hope that ASEAN can review the participation and involvement of Myanmar's military government in ASEAN membership and decision-making forums.

In addition, young people lamented the divided "fractions" among ASEAN countries regarding their stance in favour of peace and democracy in Myanmar⁴. According to one informant, the role of neighbouring countries such as Thailand and Cambodia is crucial, particularly in relation to refugee management and protection as well as the provision of general humanitarian support.

⁴A participant, for example, specifically elaborated his concern regarding these fractions. According to him, Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are the ones who support democratisation versus Laos and Thailand that are more supportive towards the military.

Some key things that young people expect:

- ASEAN monitors and assesses the situation and basic needs of vulnerable groups (e.g. refugees from Myanmar), as well as seeks the best mechanism for providing humanitarian assistance or basic fulfilment;
- The UN and ASEAN specifically monitor the situation of refugees, especially the most vulnerable (youth) in bordering countries, and advocate to neighbouring countries on Myanmar refugee management.

The role of Indonesian Government as ASEAN Chairperson in 2023

As the chair of ASEAN in 2023, young people in Myanmar have high expectations of Indonesia. This expectation is strengthened given that Indonesia experienced a similar political situation from authoritarian rule to Reformasi, and should promote the same in its advocacy and diplomacy regarding the situation in Myanmar.

Given the role and success of the Government of Indonesia in international advocacy and diplomacy, young people expect Indonesia's leadership in discussing and seeking resolutions that would be in favour of addressing the humanitarian crisis (especially the provision of basic services in humanitarian settings), and in the long term the democratisation process in Myanmar. In the short term, the Indonesian government is expected to bring the issue of humanitarian crises in Myanmar as a focus for ASEAN, especially the situation and needs of those who are affected by the ongoing humanitarian crisis.

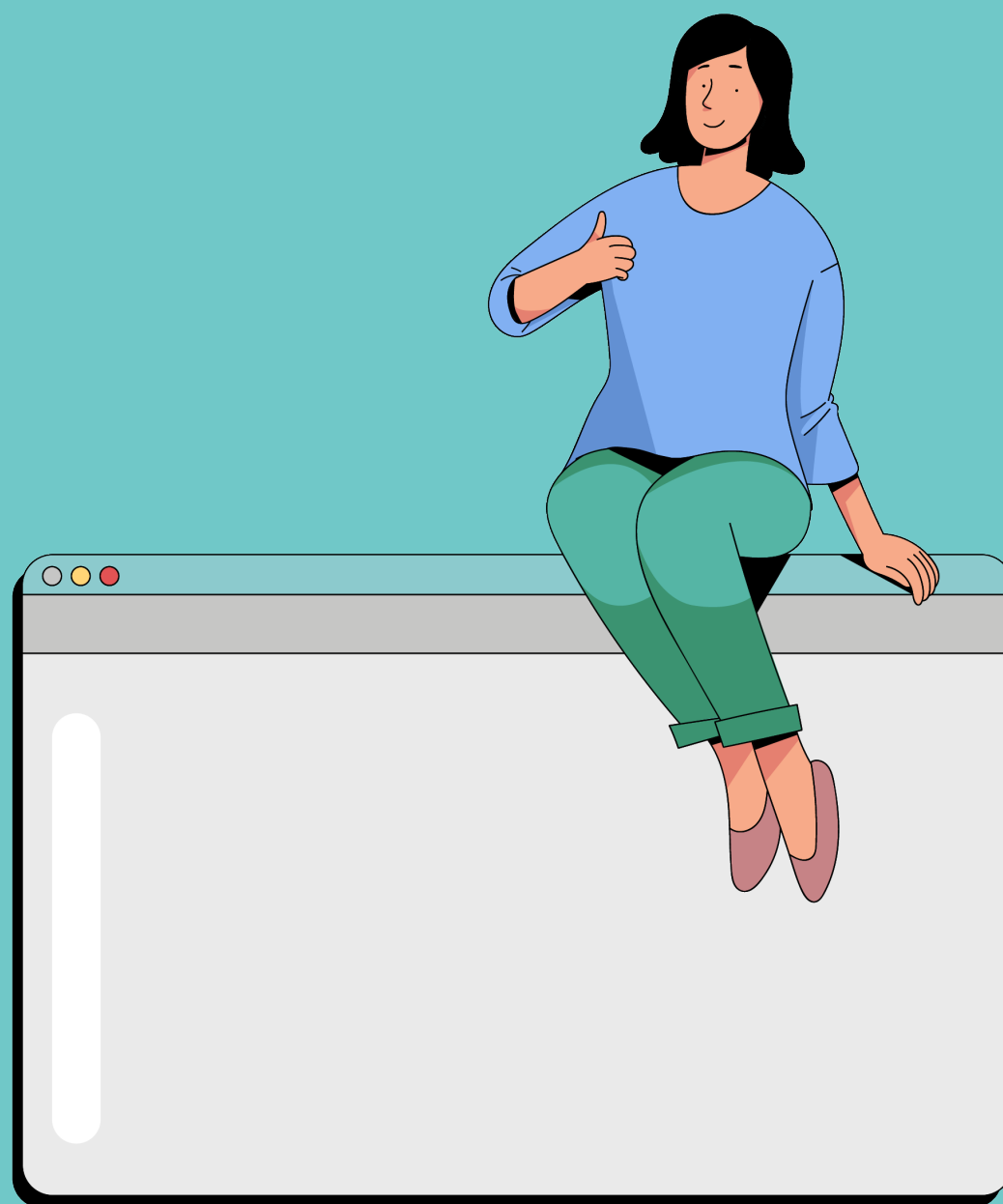
Other roles of the international community: donor agencies or NGOs

Young people lamented the limited role of donor agencies (both bilateral and multilateral) and NGOs, especially in relation to humanitarian assistance that should be prioritised to help affected communities in Myanmar. One informant even mentioned his disappointment with how the international community has sought to selectively prioritise rights issues in other countries such as Ukraine-Russia, while turning a blind eye to the situation in Myanmar.

In particular, young people demand the international community to play a role in several ways:

- Provide both financial and facilities/ infrastructure support to grassroots organisations, especially youth organisations/communities. In particular, funding is expected to be flexible and can be used according to the context of need. Simplify the process of requirements, disbursement, and reporting of funding to recipient organisations/ communities.

- Encourage cooperation between higher education institutions in places where Myanmar's youth attend school. This includes providing special scholarships or protections related to freedom of expression in academic spaces, in their capacity as students.
- Provide specialised support related to the delivery of essential health services, particularly mental health services for young people in Myanmar, something that is considered to be lacking through humanitarian aid schemes.



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About AYF

The ASEAN Youth Forum (AYF) is a movement that represents and fights for the young people in ASEAN to voice out their concerns and strategies for ways to achieve a better ASEAN. AYF has been a platform of the youth in the ASEAN to raise their voice and claim for their rights for a sustainable, inclusive, people-centered, and youth-driven regional community. The network aims to institutionalise and establish its national chapters to focus the engagement on important and timely local issues affecting the youth, and consolidate policy proposals and agenda to put forward to the relevant ASEAN offices.



