

# CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE MOVEMENT

A Foundation of Myanmar's Spring Revolution and  
Force behind Military's Failed Coup

စိုးမတက်နဲ့ စုနိုးထွက်

**CDM**



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15. Southern Youth Development Organization

### Contact Information:

#### Progressive Voice

 <http://www.progressivevoicemyanmar.org/>

 <https://www.facebook.com/progressivevoice>

 @PVamplify

 [info@progressive-voice.org](mailto:info@progressive-voice.org)

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# 1 Introduction

The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) is one of the key pillars of Myanmar's Spring Revolution. It is an ongoing civil resistance movement that has evolved from the early days of the Spring Revolution when the Myanmar military attempted a coup d'état on 1 February 2021 and is one of the key reasons why the coup has failed. In its very initial form it could be defined as a mass strike, where public sector workers from the lower rungs of the civil service through to the very top, including health, education, banking employees, railway workers, oil and gas workers, engineers, lawyers and judges, civil servants and members of the security services refused to work for the junta and refused any other order from them. It quickly morphed into a nationwide movement in which private sector workers withdrew their labor, private businesses refused to cooperate with the junta, and consumers boycotted military-linked products and services. It is a classic civil resistance movement in the Gandhian tradition of non-violence. The objective of this withdrawal of labor is to deny the junta any legitimacy or ability to govern, sending a strong signal that the people of Myanmar will not accept a military dictatorship. Despite this withdrawal of labor under the junta, CDMers<sup>1</sup> have continued to provide health, education and other essential services for Myanmar people under the auspices of the National Unity Government (NUG), Ethnic Revolutionary Organizations (EROs), or people's administration teams. Furthermore, the CDM, like the broader Spring Revolution, is made up of a diverse and inclusive group of people from all regions and all walks of life.

This report argues that the CDM has evolved, from a reaction, or a withdrawal from and non-cooperation with the military, to a movement that is building a federal democracy through people power that is stronger, more diverse and inclusive than any previous people's movements in Myanmar. Not only is it reacting and resisting the military, but it is creating a new nation in its place. This report will outline the evolution of the CDM and highlight some of the main threats and challenges that CDMers face, particularly related to security and livelihood pressures. CDMers are under immense pressure and some have felt the need to return to a work place under the junta's control. They have made incredible sacrifices for their and their children's lives for a free and fair democratic Myanmar. Some are in liberated areas of Myanmar, while some have become displaced, either internally or across Myanmar's borders. There remain substantial needs, despite the efforts of the NUG - Myanmar's legitimate government formed in the country based on the 2020 elections result – and the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) as well as ethnic nationality communities, civil society organizations (CSOs), celebrity fundraising, and the diaspora to support the CDM. And while there are other components of the Spring Revolution – namely the armed resistance manifested in the various People's Defence Forces (PDFs), and the NUG itself – the CDM is a key, non-violent component that hinders the junta's ability to function as a governing power. This report then, also argues that for international allies of Myanmar's Spring Revolution to strengthen the movement for human rights, federal democracy, justice and accountability, CDMers must be recognized and supported as human rights defenders according to internationally-recognized definitions of Human Rights Defenders (HRDs).

The objective of this report is to provide a snapshot that summarizes the CDM from its inception in response to the attempted coup d'état launched by the Myanmar military on 1 February 2021 until the end of 2022. The report aims to examine the CDM as a key pillar of the revolutionary movement, including discussing

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1 A note on terminology – as per common usage within Myanmar and beyond, participants in the CDM are usually termed 'CDMers' and going forward, this report will use this term to refer to them as such.

the groundswell of support for a genuine federal democracy - one that is inclusive of all women, ethnic communities, religious communities, disabled and LGBTIQ+ people. The research methodology for this report was formulated based on a preliminary needs assessment, consulting with human rights defenders and CDMers in July and August 2022. As part of research for this report, 22 interviews with individuals or pairs of individuals, 13 female and 9 male, were conducted with CDMers and human rights defenders to provide a snapshot of the current situation of the CDM, their aspirations and on-going needs as the Spring Revolution has progressed over the past two years. These CDMers come from various civil service departments including health, education, railways, administration, military and the police, across different regions and states throughout Myanmar. The HRDs are members of civil society organizations working in Kachin, Karen, Karenni, Shan, Chin, Sagaing and Magwe States and Regions, who have been supporting the CDM since the Spring Revolution began. This information is accompanied by desk research, including information gathered from local civil society organizations and partner organizations, academic articles, NGO reports, and journalistic sources.

## **2 The CDM Stakes its Place in Myanmar's History**

The civil disobedience movement emerged almost immediately after the coup attempt by the Myanmar military on 1 February 2021. Within days, hundreds of thousands of public sector workers were on strike by withdrawing their labor from public administration and governance, with many of them joining the street demonstrations throughout the country. And while definitions and conceptualizations of the CDM differ slightly, a consistent part of any definition is that the mass strike of public and private sector workers and civil servants is key. As for why people went on strike, the initial calls were consistent – a rejection of the attempted military coup. As a land rights activist who joined the CDM at the beginning stated in an interview for this report, “This system will destroy the future of our children and ours, so we cannot let that happen. That’s why we do what we can, and although our contribution is small, we hope it will be an obstacle for the junta.”<sup>2</sup>

The first sector of the general strike was from doctors and health workers. On 2 February 2021, doctors, nurse and other healthcare workers at Mandalay General Hospital stated that they would refuse to work for a military regime.<sup>3</sup> The movement quickly mushroomed as words of the CDM spread through social media. According to one analyst, “Two days after the coup, more than 110 public hospitals and health departments in 50 townships joined the campaign” and an estimated “90% of the total number of healthcare workers joined the CDM in the first month.”<sup>4</sup>

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2 Interview with a CDMer, July 2021.

3 Walker, Tommy. ‘How Myanmar’s Civil Disobedience Movement is Pushing Back Against the Coup.’ *Voice of America*. 27 February 2021. Available at: [https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_how-myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement-pushing-back-against-coup/6202637.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_how-myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement-pushing-back-against-coup/6202637.html)

4 Anonymous. ‘The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar’s Post-Coup Era.’ Policy Briefing – SEARBO, Australian National University. *New Mandala*. p. 5. 19 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/>

They were quickly followed by other sectors, with education being particularly prominent with workers in primary, secondary and tertiary education going on strike. The NUG puts the figure of striking teachers at 200,000 of 450,000 teachers at its peak.<sup>5</sup> The excuse that the military gave for its coup attempt was ‘election fraud.’ Yet the fact that so many teachers up and down the country volunteered to help with the voting procedures during the November 2020 elections, working hard through the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the ballots were properly conducted, made this excuse a particular insult to schoolteachers. Several universities declared themselves ‘CDM Universities’ and refused an order from the military to reopen, having been closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>6</sup> Students followed, and an estimated 90% of primary and secondary school students refused to enroll in June 2021.<sup>7</sup>

Staff at several government ministries also joined the strike, including the Ministries of Religious Affairs, Transport and Communications, Electricity and Energy, Social Welfare, Information, Health, Education, Planning and Finance, and Foreign Affairs.<sup>8</sup> Port and harbor workers stopped working, while miners and those workers at military-equipment making factories under the junta’s Ministry of Defence also went on strike.<sup>9</sup> Of 30,000 railway workers, 90% were on strike within a week of the coup attempt.<sup>10</sup> It is estimated that, within a few weeks, over 400,000 civil servants were on strike, which “effectively gutted the country’s bureaucracy.”<sup>11</sup> The NUG put a more exact figure – 417,060.<sup>12</sup>

The defections by members of the armed forces and the police were also notable. The NUG’s September 2021 report highlights that 2,000 soldiers had defected, and organizations have been set up to encourage defections and support those who make this step.<sup>13</sup> By December 2021, People’s Embrace, an organization established by defectors put the figure of 6,000 police officers who had made contact with resistance groups or the NUG.<sup>14</sup> By the end of 2022, around 10,000 people, including 7,000 police and 3,000 soldiers

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5 ‘Dozens of teachers killed, hundreds arrested by Myanmar junta for joining strike.’ *RFA Burmese*. 22 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/teachers-killed-07222022161430.html>

6 Anonymous. ‘The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar’s Post-Coup Era.’ Policy Briefing – SEARBO, Australian National University. *New Mandala*. p. 5. 19 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/>

7 *Ibid*, p.5.

8 Dreschler, Wolfgang. ‘New Development: Myanmar’s Civil Service – Responsible disobedience during the 2021 military coup.’ *Public Money and Management*. 2021. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/09540962.2021.1928948>

9 Ko Maung and Stephen Campbell. ‘Dare to struggle, dare to win: Workers’ resistance since the coup.’ *Frontier Myanmar*. 18 February 2022. Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/dare-to-struggle-dare-to-win-workers-resistance-since-the-coup/>

10 ‘Police, soldiers forcibly evict more than 1,000 rail workers and their families.’ *Frontier Myanmar*. 10 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/police-soldiers-forcibly-evict-more-than-1000-rail-workers-and-their-families/>

11 ‘Effective Control in Myanmar.’ *Special Advisory Council for Myanmar*. p.17. 5 September 2022. Available at: <https://specialadvisorycouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/SAC-M-Briefing-Paper-Effective-Control-in-Myanmar-ENGLISH-1.pdf>

12 ‘Myanmar’s Civil Disobedience Movement.’ *National Unity Government of Myanmar*. p.5. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2021-09-17-210916\\_CDM\\_Report\\_edited-signed.pdf](https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2021-09-17-210916_CDM_Report_edited-signed.pdf)

13 *Ibid*.

14 Nyein Swe and Min Min. ‘Over 8,000 soldiers and police officers have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, says defector group.’ *Myanmar Now*. 1 December 2021. Available at: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/over-8000-soldiers-and-police-officers-have-joined-the-civil-disobedience-movement-says>

had defected.<sup>15</sup> In Karenni State, the Karenni State Police Force, comprised of 320 people, was formed by police officers who refused to work for the junta and joined the CDM.<sup>16</sup>

Internationally, diplomats and other members of the Foreign Ministry have participated in the CDM in their own way. Famously, Kyaw Moe Tun, the Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the United Nations, joined the CDM and publicly condemned the coup attempt in a speech to the General Assembly in New York, urging international action against the coup plotters.<sup>17</sup> Diplomats and embassy staff also joined the CDM, causing the junta to recall over 100 staff in March 2021 from embassies throughout the world.<sup>18</sup>

According to the NUG, the CDM is made of two other components<sup>19</sup> in addition to the civil servants strike. One of these components is the mass public protests and demonstrations against the junta that thronged towns, cities and villages throughout Myanmar in February and March 2021. This was before the junta's violent and brutal crackdowns using live fire. The early weeks of street protests, while containing a sense of trepidation, were also filled with joy, color and expression. From LGBTIQ+ communities, religious and ethnic minorities to bodybuilders, celebrities, artists and sportspeople, the whole of Myanmar seemed to put away their differences to unify against the prospect of military rule. The protests even included family members of military officials. The placards, slogans and speeches at these protests included exhortations to join the general strike such as 'don't go to the office, break away.'<sup>20</sup> The first few weeks after the coup attempt, the streets were filled with the sounds of pots and pans banging at 8pm each evening, signifying the banishing of evil from people's homes.<sup>21</sup> Creative protests such as the *htamein* protest, in which the traditional women's sarong was draped as a flag across streets, caused soldiers to fear they would lose their *pone*, or masculine power, if they passed underneath<sup>22</sup> were held. Many other creative forms of protest characterized these early weeks of resistance.

Following on from the idea of withdrawal of labor, which the CDM's general strike employs as its main resistance tactic, is the withdrawal of monetary patronage to the military. The Myanmar military has for decades been heavily involved in key sectors of the economy, including tourism, beverages, banking, the media, construction, mining and oil and gas, mainly through two military-established and military-

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15 'Junta Defections Drop Two Years After Military Coup.' *VOA News*. 30 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/junta-defections-drop-two-years-after-myanmar-coup/6940032.html>

16 'Anti-junta police force formed in Karenni State by striking police officials.' *Myanmar Now*. 26 August 2021. Available at: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/anti-junta-police-force-formed-in-karenni-state-by-striking-police-officials>

17 Sullivan, Becky. 'Myanmar Ambassador Fired After Extraordinary Rebuke of the Military Before the UN.' *NPR*. 27 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.npr.org/2021/02/27/972103648/myanmar-ambassador-fired-after-extraordinary-rebuke-of-the-military-before-the-u>

18 'Myanmar Regime Recalls Over 100 Staff from Foreign Missions.' *The Irrawaddy*. 1 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-recalls-100-staff-foreign-missions.html>

19 'Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement.' *National Unity Government of Myanmar*. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2021-09-17-210916\\_CDM\\_Report\\_edited-signed.pdf](https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2021-09-17-210916_CDM_Report_edited-signed.pdf)

20 Anonymous. 'The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era.' Policy Briefing – SEARBO, Australian National University. *New Mandala*. 19 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/>

21 Lovett, Lorcan. 'The nights of pots and pans are back, on Myanmar's fearful streets.' *The Guardian*. 2 February 2021. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/02/the-nights-of-pots-and-pans-are-back-on-myanmar-fearful-streets>

22 Wah, Esther. 'The revolution is ours.' *Myanmar Now*. 7 June 2021. Available at: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/the-revolution-is-ours>



run conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Corporation and the Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited.<sup>23</sup> Boycotts of these companies, most famously Myanmar Beer, resulted in significant loss of revenue for the military, while the public has also boycotted the military-run lottery.<sup>24</sup> People refused to pay their electricity bills, not wanting to provide junta-run ministries with any revenue.

The third component of the CDM, added to the public sector strike and public protests and boycotts, is that of the private sector. Garment factory workers in Yangon's industrial zones were one of the first groups of people who went on strike, mobilized by trade unions that had been taking forms of industrial action for better working conditions and pay in the previous years. The garment sector is one of the Myanmar's major export sectors, employing around 600,000, mostly female workers. Their strike action and taking to the streets in the first week following the coup attempt had a galvanizing effect on broader protests and nationwide strikes.<sup>25</sup> Workers of private sector banks also went on strike, almost shutting down the sector. By 8 February 2021, almost all branches of private banks had to shut their doors due to staff members joining the CDM while ATM withdrawal limits of 500,000 MMK per day (around \$350) were imposed in order to try and prevent a run on the banks.<sup>26</sup> Private businesses refused to pay taxes to the military and vendors and shops refused to sell military-made products.<sup>27</sup>

One of the key aspects of the CDM is that it is largely leaderless. While there are high profile figures such as Tayzar San, a doctor turned activist and one of the first leaders of anti-junta demonstrations,<sup>28</sup> the CDM does not rely on direction from a central coordinating mechanism nor a hierarchical structure. As a CDM doctor from Yangon told media outlet, *Voice of America*, "The CDM movement [is] a collective leadership. We are all the followers and leaders."<sup>29</sup> Another aspect is that it cuts across class lines. From the garment factory workers in working class urban areas, to medical doctors to rural schoolteachers, Myanmar people have risen up. The vast wealth that the military generals and their cronies have accumulated through decades of previous military regime, but also through the economic liberalization period of the past ten years, has only added to the marginalization and impoverishment of even what are typically regarded as middle class professions. As a railway department official who joined the CDM pointed out, "The system needs to be changed. I don't regret my decision. Whether win or lose, I will keep joining the fight. Why do I think about losing? It is because 80 percent of the wealth is owned or controlled by the military and military related cronies. Only 20 percent is owned by the people."<sup>30</sup>

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23 Jones, Lee. 'The Political Economy of Myanmar's Transition.' *Journal of Contemporary Asia*. 44(1) pp.144-170. 2014.

24 'Cracks in the Cartel: The Second Year of Justice for Myanmar.' *Justice for Myanmar*. 28 April 2022. Available at: <https://www.justiceformyanmar.org/press-releases/cracks-in-the-cartel-the-second-year-of-justice-for-myanmar>

25 'Workers in Myanmar are Launching General Strikes to Resist the Military Coup.' *Jacobin*. 9 March 2021. Available at: [https://jacobin.com/2021/03/myanmar-burma-general-strike-coup/?fbclid=IwAR1d4hL73liFLkId2XmCD1yLDYO0MlcLes28-zhjqWrp36PG-1\\_1A65ruo4](https://jacobin.com/2021/03/myanmar-burma-general-strike-coup/?fbclid=IwAR1d4hL73liFLkId2XmCD1yLDYO0MlcLes28-zhjqWrp36PG-1_1A65ruo4)

26 'Myanmar central bank limits ATM transactions, account withdrawals.' *The Irrawaddy*. 1 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-central-bank-limits-atm-transactions-account-withdrawals.html>

27 *Ibid.*

28 Walker, Tommy. 'Doctor – Activist Defiant Against Myanmar Military.' *Voice of America*. 15 June 2021. Available at: [https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_doctor-activist-defiant-against-myanmar-military/6207031.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_doctor-activist-defiant-against-myanmar-military/6207031.html)

29 Walker, Tommy. 'How Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement is Pushing Back Against the Coup.' *Voice of America*. 27 February 2021. Available at: [https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific\\_how-myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement-pushing-back-against-coup/6202637.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/east-asia-pacific_how-myanmars-civil-disobedience-movement-pushing-back-against-coup/6202637.html)

30 Interview with a CDMer, August 2022.

The CDM movement succeeded in paralyzing the junta, ensuring that it could not take control of the country. Health, education, railway and banking sectors, among others, could barely function for months after the coup attempt and in many areas of Myanmar, they now function under new revolutionary administrations. Such sectors are still hugely hampered over two years after the coup attempt. The NUG report of September 2021 noted that the “CDM has had significant impacts on the junta’s ability to manage critical sectors, such as banking and currency, public finance, transportation, trade and investment.”<sup>31</sup> As one commentator put it, “this non-violent resistance – by people united across ethnic boundaries – is what most shakes the throne of the dictator.”<sup>32</sup> Two years later, the CDM continues to be active and resolute, despite the hardships, violence, and sacrifice that its members have endured, and thus caused the coup attempt to be a failure. In some areas where resistance has been most successful, the CDM participants are staffing a whole governance structure. In Chin State, it is estimated that by May 2022 the resistance forces controlled around 70% of the state’s territory<sup>33</sup> and this is down to not just armed resistance, but the fact that around 70% of civil servants joined the CDM, preventing the junta taking control.<sup>34</sup>

The success of the CDM in **not letting a brutal and violent junta take power** gained credit and recognition internationally with six scholars from the University of Oslo nominating the CDM for the 2022 Nobel Peace Prize. The nomination letter, notes how this “large-scale and nationwide anti-coup resistance movement thus emerged across ethnic, religious, generational, class and gender divides” and that the CDM “strives to create a united stand against the military’s divide and rule tactics and for federal democracy.”<sup>35</sup>

A second aspect of the CDM and the Spring Revolution more broadly that can be deemed a success is its **inclusivity, diversity and intersectionality**. The public protests, support for striking workers, and the broad spectrum of non-violent resistance activities were undertaken by all sectors of Myanmar society. Women in particular played and still play a vital role in the CDM. Indeed, two of the biggest and most important sectors of striking workers – the garment industry and education – are overwhelmingly female dominated. As Esther Wah, an indigenous Karen female activist put it, women are “leading the grassroots movement against the junta, standing at the forefront of demonstrations, organizing communities, providing support and care for villages and neighborhoods.”<sup>36</sup> Not only are women at the forefront of the CDM and the broader Spring Revolution, but they are working to overturn a culture and institution

31 ‘Myanmar’s Civil Disobedience Movement.’ *National Unity Government of Myanmar*. p.14. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2021-09-17-210916\\_CDM\\_Report\\_edited-signed.pdf](https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2021-09-17-210916_CDM_Report_edited-signed.pdf)

32 Khine. ‘Non-violent resistance is shaking the dictator’s throne.’ *Frontier Myanmar*. 26 April 2021. Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/non-violent-resistance-is-shaking-the-dictators-throne/>

33 ‘Around 70% of Western Myanmar’s Chin State controlled by resistance.’ *The Irrawaddy*. 8 September 2022. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/interview/around-70-of-western-myanmars-chin-state-controlled-by-resistance.html>

34 Ye Myo Hein. ‘One year on: The Momentum of Myanmar’s armed rebellion.’ *The Wilson Center and The Tagaung Institute*. May 2022. Available at: <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/one-year-momentum-myanmars-armed-rebellion>

35 ‘Letter to the Nobel Peace Prize Committee.’ *Norwegian Academics*. 22 March, 2021. Available at: <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Nobel.pdf>

36 Wah, Esther. ‘The revolution is ours.’ *Myanmar Now*. 7 June 2021. Available at: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/the-revolution-is-ours>

of militarized patriarchy. The CDM has also shown to be inclusive in terms of LGBTIQ+ people, as protests contained an “unprecedented visibility for the LGBTIQ+ community, and with it growing national support from fellow CDMers and persecution from the military junta.”<sup>37</sup> The rainbow flags, openly trans protesters, and their acceptance by the broader protest movement brings attention to the specific legislative and social discrimination they face, but has also bolstered the CDM itself. While much work remains to be done to ensure these efforts lay the foundation that guarantees equality for all in future federal democratic structures and governance, this inclusivity is striking and a hugely positive step in Myanmar society which is traditionally culturally conservative.

The **inter-ethnic solidarity** among the CDM and the Spring Revolution is another aspect of the resistance which is threatening the military junta. Myanmar has been rife with conflict around ethnic lines for many decades, divisions which are a legacy of British colonialism but fostered and exacerbated by the Myanmar military ever since independence so as to secure their own place as a “protector of the nation.” Since the coup attempt, the majority Bamar ethnic group from the cities and central plains of Myanmar, the very regions where the Myanmar military has historically recruited from, are now increasingly coming to understand the struggles, persecution and aspirations of minority ethnic groups, while also realizing how they themselves have been manipulated by military leaders and Bamar elites. On the flipside of this coin is a building of trust as ethnic people have come to see genuine solidarity from this generation of Bamar and differentiating them from the political machinations of the Myanmar military. This only underscores why the establishment of a federal democracy based on ethnic equality and self-determination is absolutely necessary for a post-junta future. The brutality of the military and its naked greed for power at the expense of the people, whether Bamar or ethnic nationality, are now clear to all. More empathy, solidarity and connections have thus been built. A representative from an ethnic CSO stated:

“

*Before this, people had little knowledge about the ethnic struggle. After the coup, they experienced how brutal the military regime is. We could see that their perspective and understanding about ethnic people has changed a lot. We have so much hope in this new generation. Unlike the old generation, they have open minds and find it easy to adapt to the situation. They even apologize regarding what happened to ethnic people and they speak out online.*<sup>38</sup>

”

Perhaps most striking were the demonstrations of support for the Rohingya in the early protests. While many practical steps remain unfulfilled in order to ensure justice and accountability for the genocide committed against the Rohingya, many young Myanmar people were seen apologizing publicly in the streets for their silence and even complicity during the Rohingya genocide of 2017, and joined solidarity marches for the Rohingya. Such displays demonstrate the potential for the future of Myanmar and furthering concrete support towards participation of Rohingya in a federal democratic Myanmar.

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37 Smith, Noah. ‘Being Gay in a Coup: The Plight of Myanmar’s LGBTIQ Community.’ *Res Publica*. 29 July 2021. Available at: <https://respublicapolitics.com/articles/being-gay-in-a-coup-the-plight-of-myanmars-lgbtqi-community>

38 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

This diversity and inclusivity lays a foundation for belonging and nation-building that goes beyond the Myanmar military's hate-mongering violent state-building project. As Anna King points out in an early analysis of the Spring Revolution, academic literature on civil resistance shows that the more inclusive a resistance movement is, the more likely it is to gain public support, to succeed, and to build a more peaceful, sustainable future.<sup>39</sup> Indeed the CDM goes beyond the Daw Aung San Suu Kyi-led National League for Democracy (NLD) Government's top-down, hierarchical, Bamar-dominant approach that disregarded the decades-long exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities and pursued an economic path which deepened inequality. As a CDMer who is also part of a civil society organization put it, "We are not fighting for NLD or Aung San Suu Kyi. We are fighting for democratic values. We are fighting for freedom."<sup>40</sup> While challenges around inclusion and equality remain within the CDM, there has been an intersectional solidarity in the CDM and the Spring Revolution, united by opposition to the violence, greed and persecution of the Myanmar military, and with a determination to build a better future by dismantling the chauvinistic, misogynistic and exclusionary ideology that underpins this violent institution.<sup>41</sup> Looking forward, there must be an official and institutional recognition of the historic role that the CDM has played in the Spring Revolution so it can be a movement that is celebrated by the Myanmar public, as well as staking a place in world history.

## 4 Challenges

Amid the successes of the CDM in crippling the junta's ability to govern and to build an inclusive and diverse movement to not just defeat the junta and restore the status quo but to build a new Myanmar, threats and challenges came thick and fast. These include the violence that the junta resorted to, not only to CDMers but to their family members, the devastating wave of COVID-19 in July/August 2021, and the livelihood difficulties of continuing an indefinite strike in one of the poorest countries in the region.

### Security

First of all are the security threats. The junta has had no qualms in inflicting the most horrific violence against members of the CDM. In the first few days and weeks of the demonstrations and strikes, the junta was relatively restrained in terms of using violence and coercion, although this must be considered as relative to the long bloody history of violence used by the same military against peaceful protesters in previous people power movements such as the 8888 uprising and 2007 Saffron Revolution. CDM civil servants were subject to more persuasive means from the junta, such as offering promotions and extra benefits to those who did not strike, while giving warnings to those on strike.<sup>42</sup> However by March 2021

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39 King, Anna, S. 'Myanmar's Coup d'état and the Struggle for Federal Democracy and Inclusive Government.' *Religions*. June 2022. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/7/594>

40 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

41 'Pride and Prejudice.' *Progressive Voice* (Weekly Highlights). 27 May 2022. Available at: <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/05/27/pride-and-prejudice/>

42 Anonymous. 'The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era.' Policy Briefing – SEARBO, Australian National University. *New Mandala*. p. 12. 19 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/>

the crackdowns, whether on the streets against peaceful demonstrators or violent searches and arrests for CDMers, began.<sup>43</sup> The public crackdowns are well documented and the use of live fire on protesters marked a brutal few weeks on the streets of towns and cities of Myanmar. Firing on peaceful protesters, releasing hundreds of common criminals from prison with instructions to create havoc in urban neighborhoods, beatings, barricading wards in which protests were occurring and going door-to-door violently arresting protesters all occurred. One of the worst days was 14 March, in the working-class ward of Hlaingtharyar, a hub of factories and other industry. Junta soldiers stormed through barricades, kettled the protesters and opened fire. It is estimated 65 people were killed in just one day.<sup>44</sup> The attack on Hlaingtharyar, a stronghold of labor activity and a site of some of the most resolute resistance in the early days, was the worst single day of fatalities of urban protesters.

Graphic footage of medics being beaten, reports of schoolteachers subjected to sexual assault and public servants being tortured in prison mark a consistent and unreserved use of violence by the junta to end the CDM.<sup>45</sup> In one particularly gruesome case, junta soldiers beheaded a CDM teacher who was teaching at a CDM run school in Magwe Region.<sup>46</sup> While doctors and healthcare workers continued to treat patients and visit sick people privately, unwilling to abandon their responsibilities in a pandemic, the junta weaponized this.<sup>47</sup> Occasions of soldiers calling medical doctors requesting assistance while pretending to be civilians, only to arrest doctors, represent a particularly devious and cruel tactic.<sup>48</sup> A plethora of massacres, killing scores of innocent people, occurred in these weeks, and killings, violence, torture are still routinely used.<sup>49</sup> The junta also uses family members of CDMers as hostages, arresting them if they cannot find their targets.<sup>50</sup> While this did not stop flashmob style protests, it ended the types of mass protests seen in the early days where hundreds of thousands took to the streets to reject the military. Meanwhile the atrocities against CDMers continue, such as the CDM nurse in Bago Region, who was tortured, raped and shot dead by junta soldiers in February 2023 for helping the wife of a PDF fighter give birth. Her body was found partially burned a few days later.<sup>51</sup>

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43 'Myanmar: End Lethal Force Against Protesters.' *Human Rights Watch*. 3 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/04/myanmar-end-lethal-force-against-protesters>

44 'Myanmar: Protesters Targeted in March Massacre.' *Human Rights Watch*. 2 December 2021. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/12/02/myanmar-protesters-targeted-march-massacre>

45 'Statement by Thomas H. Andrews, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, at the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council.' 22 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2021/09/statement-thomas-h-andrews-un-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-myanmar>

46 'US condemns Myanmar junta force beheading of teacher.' *BNI*. 24 October 2022. Available at: <https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/us-condemns-myanmar-junta-force-beheading-cdm-teacher>

47 Head, Jonathan. 'Myanmar Coup: The doctors and nurses defying the military.' *BBC*. 7 January 2022. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-59649006>

48 'Myanmar Junta arrests doctors after luring them with fake COVID 'emergency.' *The Irrawaddy*. 20 July 2021. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-arrests-doctors-after-luring-them-with-fake-covid-emergency.html>

49 'Statement by Thomas H. Andrews, UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Myanmar, at the 48<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council.' 22 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2021/09/statement-thomas-h-andrews-un-special-rapporteur-situation-human-rights-myanmar>

50 'No holds barred: Myanmar junta grabs family members to get at wanted protesters.' *RFA*. 6 May 2021. Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/protest-hostages-05062021185121.html>

51 "အုတ်ဖိုတွင် ဆေးကုပြန်လာသည့် CDM သူနာပြု မမေဇွန်မိုးကို စစ်တပ်က မုဒိမ်းကျင့် သတ်ဖြတ်အလောင်းဖျောက်၊ သူနာပြုကို လိုက်ပို့သည့် PDF ၌ ဦးကိုမူ စစ်တပ်က ပစ်သတ်။" *Khit Thit Media*. 26 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/khitthitnews/photos/pcb.1736980556739283/1736979726739366>

As for the striking public sector workers, the junta ministries set deadlines for them to return to work, and ordered them to repay two months' advance salary which had been provided by the NLD-led Government as COVID-19 assistance.<sup>52</sup> The junta also resorted to violence and “to intimidate the CDMers and their supporters, soldiers and police have carried out lethal and extra-lethal violence such as dragging dead bodies on the streets, posting footages of torture and killings, and mutilating dead bodies before giving them back to family members.”<sup>53</sup> One CDMer interviewed for this report, a health worker, was regularly called by the head of the hospital who tried to persuade her to return to work, and threatened a lawsuit if she didn't come back.<sup>54</sup>

Another form of coercion is the forced evictions, which is particularly impactful as many civil servants and public sector workers rely on government housing. In just one day in March 2021, 1,000 railway workers were evicted in Yangon's Tamwe Township after the junta did not succeed in forcing them back to work at gunpoint.<sup>55</sup> Arrests of CDMers have been common, with the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) reporting that by the end of 2022, they had documented over 16,000 arrests related to the coup attempt.<sup>56</sup> Although the numbers of CDMers among this figure are not known exactly, and this depends on the definition of CDM, a significant number of more than 16,000 political prisoners were arrested for their participation in the CDM.

In terms of education staff, AAPP has documented the arrest of over 200 CDM teachers and the deaths of over 24 by July 2022, either being shot dead or tortured to death by the military junta.<sup>57</sup> Interviewees often explained how the junta would target outspoken people, and make examples of certain high profile local CDMers to send a message to others and instill fear as regards joining the CDM. In particular, the junta has been using Sections 505 and 505A of the Penal Code, which it amended in February 2021 to insert a criminal offense, punishable by up to three years in prison, if people make comments or partake in any action that encourages civil servants to withdraw their labor.<sup>58</sup> This was a direct attack on the CDM and in the first 12 months following the coup attempt, Free Expression Myanmar, a Myanmar CSO, found that nearly 4,000 people were charged under Section 505 or 505A of the Penal Code.<sup>59</sup> In more recent months

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52 Anonymous. 'The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era.' Policy Briefing – SEARBO, Australian National University. *New Mandala*. 19 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/>

53 Anonymous. 'The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era.' Policy Briefing – SEARBO, Australian National University. *New Mandala*. p. 12. 19 October 2021. Available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/the-centrality-of-the-civil-disobedience-movement-in-myanmars-post-coup-era/>

54 Interview with a CDMer, July 2021.

55 'Police, soldiers forcibly evict more than 1,000 rail workers and their families.' *Frontier Myanmar*. 10 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/police-soldiers-forcibly-evict-more-than-1000-rail-workers-and-their-families/>

56 'Graphs of arrest and death data as of December 31, 2022 collected and compiled by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) since the February 1, 2021 military coup.' *Assistance Association for Political Prisoners*. 2 January 2023. Available at: <https://aappb.org/?p=23826>

57 'Dozens of teachers killed, hundreds arrested by Myanmar junta for joining strike.' *Radio Free Asia*. 22 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/teachers-killed-07222022161430.html>

58 'Myanmar: Post-coup Legal Changes Erode Human Rights.' *International Commission of Jurists and Human Rights Watch*. 2 March 2021. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/02/myanmar-post-coup-legal-changes-erode-human-rights>

59 '505A: Acts of Revenge,' *Free Expression Myanmar*. 2022. Available at: <https://freeexpressionmyanmar.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/505a-act-of-revenge-1.pdf>

the junta has been charging people with the Counter-Terrorism Law, the sentences of which are much harsher, including life imprisonment.<sup>60</sup>

Many people thus had to flee from their homes, often over the borders to Thailand or to India where they face security threats related to legal status, while others are in hiding. They are reliant on individuals, families and relatives, and the civil society organizations and people's networks that have been established to support the CDM, such as People's Embrace, which helps defecting soldiers and police. Yet this support is not proportionate to the great needs and has proved difficult to sustain due to lack of resources. Even with their support, there are serious threats and the journey to sanctuary can be perilous. One defecting army captain spoke of having to change car 13 times as he fled to the safety, hiding in a sealed container in the vehicle while his superiors searched for him at his family's home.<sup>61</sup> Destroying or sealing houses of protesters' families has been a common practice seen along with arrests and hostage-taking of family members. Another participant in the protests had her parents' house destroyed by junta soldiers as they were looking for her.<sup>62</sup> An informer had told the junta soldiers that her young son was in the house as a way to locate the mother before she managed to flee to the jungle.

Others moved from place to place, hiding in the homes of friends and families or at safe houses arranged by civil society. Yet due to the requirement that all household guests need to be registered at the local administration office by law – a stipulation that was in place for many years, loosened slightly in recent years but reinstated by the junta – this was not easy. This has worsened in recent months as the junta attempts to register voters for its supposed illegal election that Min Aung Hlaing wants to conduct in late 2023.<sup>63</sup> However, it is important to note that many local administration officials are quiet supporters or cooperating with the CDM, turning a blind eye or even warning or helping those in hiding so they can escape arrest. As one interviewee, a health worker who went on the run in March 2021, said “When something happens, we have to pack our bags and be ready to run. That's how we have to live.”<sup>64</sup> CDM interviewees talked of going on the run and asking their parents to “disown them” so that when soldiers come to their parents' house looking for them, they can say that they have no contact anymore with their son or daughter.

Such threats of violence have had a negative impact on the mental health of hundreds of thousands of people. As a female CDMer stated:

“

*CDMers are being forgotten in the current situation, but most of them don't really mind about it. However, some CDMers are feeling psychologically insecure and living in fear of being arrested at any time, either day or night. Some have been getting treatment or taking medicine to calm down.*<sup>65</sup>

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60 'Dozens of teachers killed, hundreds arrested by Myanmar junta for joining strike.' *Radio Free Asia*. 22 July 2022. Available at: <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/teachers-killed-07222022161430.html>

61 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

62 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

63 Hein Htoo Zan. 'Myanmar regime begins compiling voter lists for planned election.' *The Irrawaddy*. 11 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-regime-begins-compiling-voter-lists-for-planned-election.html>

64 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

65 Interview with a CDMer, August 2022.

## COVID-19

Health worries were particularly felt during the summer and monsoon months of 2021, as the Delta variant of COVID-19 tore through Myanmar. Utterly unprepared and with the junta weaponizing much-needed oxygen tanks, the scale of death was huge, and may never be accurately accounted for. This was a crisis in which hundreds if not thousands of people were dying each day from COVID-19 and the CDM healthcare workers were at the frontline. Exact numbers are hard to come by and official statistics do not reflect the realities on the ground. However, funeral operators and aid workers in Yangon talked of upward of 1,000 people dying a day in July 2021, while photos of bodies piling up and cemeteries unable to keep up with the burning of dead bodies spread on social media.<sup>66</sup>

On 11 July 2021, the junta ordered that oxygen tanks would no longer be permitted to be used in private homes, instead, had to be diverted to junta-controlled hospitals, clinics and quarantine centers.<sup>67</sup> The junta's responses, to commandeer all oxygen for itself, to open fire on desperate family members of patients queuing for oxygen in Yangon,<sup>68</sup> or to ban transportation of oxygen to Chin State<sup>69</sup> were all part of a collective punishment of the people of Myanmar and an attempt to try to force medical workers back under the guise of junta providing healthcare.

It is important to note here that CDM doctors and medical staff did not abandon patients. While not going to work in their defiance against the junta, they continued to treat people clandestinely and privately, at homes or at private hospitals or charities, as best they could. One example is the doctors who pooled their resources and set up a clandestine clinic in a monastery, even though they anticipated the inevitable junta raid.<sup>70</sup> One doctor, who had been on the run for months, told news agency, *AP*, "the junta is purposely targeting the whole healthcare system as a weapon of war."<sup>71</sup> His colleagues meanwhile had been arrested for running an underground clinic. The junta had also jailed the head of the COVID-19 vaccine rollout, Dr. Htar Htar Lin, and charged her with high treason for participating in the CDM.<sup>72</sup> The junta issued photos and names of hundreds of doctors and nurses in the form of a 'wanted list' for their crime of participating

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66 'Myanmar, in coup aftermath, faces exploding pandemic.' *VOA*. 29 July 2021. Available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic-myanmar-coup-aftermath-faces-exploding-pandemic/6208879.html>

67 'Myanmar Suffering From Severe Shortage of Medical Oxygen as Covid-19 Cases Spike.' *The Irrawaddy*. 12 July 2021. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-suffering-from-severe-shortage-of-medical-oxygen-as-covid-19-cases-spike.html>

68 'Soldiers Open Fire, Disperse Crowds Refilling Oxygen Tanks in Yangon.' *Coconuts Yangon*. 13 July 2021. Available at: <https://coconuts.co/yangon/news/soldiers-open-fire-disperse-crowds-refilling-oxygen-tanks-in-yangon/>

69 'Transport of food, medicine restricted despite temporary ceasefire extension in Mindat.' *Myanmar Now*. 10 July 2021. Available at: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/transport-of-food-medicine-restricted-despite-temporary-ceasefire-extension-in-mindat>

70 Gelineau, Kristen & Milko, Victoria. 'In Myanmar, the military and police declare war on medics.' *AP News*. 6 July 2021. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/only-on-ap-myanmar-business-science-coronavirus-pandemic-3b4c3e6d711b5eac1209a2c8fd90b2b4>

71 *Ibid*.

72 'Former head of COVID-19 vaccine rollout charged with high treason.' *Myanmar Now*. 16 June 2021. Available at: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/former-head-of-covid-19-vaccine-rollout-charged-with-high-treason>



in the CDM.<sup>73</sup> Arrests, beatings and killings of CDM medical staff were common through this period, adding to the public health emergency and increasing the pressure on the movement.<sup>74</sup> Research by Insecurity Insight, Physicians for Human Rights, and the Center for Public Health and Human Rights, Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health shows that 284 health workers had been arrested, there were 113 raids on hospitals and 31 health workers were killed between February and November 2021.<sup>75</sup> Already a poor nation with decades of neglect of the healthcare system, the junta's subsequent weaponization of the pandemic resulted in an unbearable situation for the people of Myanmar.

## Financial Pressures and Threats to Livelihoods

The threat and actualities of extreme violence and the challenges of the COVID-19 crisis were compounded by the financial hardship of losing income, housing and other benefits. Furthermore, for civil servants, their whole career and life has centered around a public sector job, they lose everything if they go on strike, not just their job and income, but pensions and housing – pensions which they may have spent many years working for. It is even worse when there is more than one family member in a household joining the CDM. If both breadwinners of a family are not receiving income due to their participation in the CDM, there is no alternative private sector-derived income to tide the family over. The general cost of living, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic and with the junta ruining the economy, means that people were already facing immense struggles. If this economic hardship translates into the problems paying for healthcare for family members, it becomes very difficult to continue the CDM.

Speaking about the mass arrests of teachers, one CDMer spoke of how some teachers could not flee because they had ill family members, and thus felt they had no choice but to return to work.<sup>76</sup> This is compounded by the threats of arrest and violence to family members of the CDM. Such family members have fear that, if they are ill and need to go to hospital or access other basic services, they will be “taken hostage if they are found to have family members who joined the CDM.”<sup>77</sup> Thus guilt over such situations, afraid of what happens if parents or other family members become ill, forces some people to choose to return to work.<sup>78</sup> In some cases, even those who do return to work face arrest or other forms of threat and intimidation while they are placed under surveillance. What's more is the blacklist that the junta has created of striking civil servants that has been sent to passport offices and the immigration department, thus blocking them from leaving the country to study or work overseas.<sup>79</sup>

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73 Gelineau, Kristen & Milko, Victoria. 'In Myanmar, the military and police declare war on medics.' *AP News*. 6 July 2021. Available at:

<https://apnews.com/article/only-on-ap-myanmar-business-science-coronavirus-pandemic-3b4c3e6d711b5eac1209a2c8fd90b2b4>

74 'Myanmar, in Coup Aftermath, Faces Exploding Pandemic.' *VOA*. 29 July 2021. Available at:

[https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic\\_myanmar-coup-aftermath-faces-exploding-pandemic/6208879.html](https://www.voanews.com/a/covid-19-pandemic_myanmar-coup-aftermath-faces-exploding-pandemic/6208879.html)

75 'Violence against or obstruction of health care in Myanmar.' *Physicians for Human Rights*. 23 December 2021.

Available at: <https://phr.org/our-work/resources/violence-against-health-care-in-myanmar/>

76 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

77 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

78 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

79 'Striking civil servants still face regime's wrath, 18 months on.' *Frontier*. 3 August 2022.

Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/striking-civil-servants-still-face-regimes-wrath-18-months-on/>

Added to this is the blacklisting of CDMers for employment that is rumored to exist, as well as the fear for retribution that private sector employers have in hiring known CDM participants. As this female CDMer stated:

“

*It is very difficult for CDMers to find work as employers do not want to hire them. Some employers and enterprise owners don't hire CDMers as they are worried about the potential impact on their business when that CDMer is arrested.<sup>80</sup>*

”

Another female CDMer spoke of such financial difficulties and pressures:

“

*The lives of CDMers are facing many challenges. Some of my CDM friends don't have any income, so they try to open a small shop. However, they get targeted and they have to close the shop. When they apply for a job in the private sector, no one wants to hire them because they are CDMers. Sometimes, they also face humiliation from non-CDM people saying nothing will change just because you joined CDM.<sup>81</sup>*

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Although some CSOs and private donors, the NUG, CRPH and support from the Myanmar diaspora have tried to fill the gaps, ultimately, the various threats and pressures of participating in the CDM has forced some people back to work. These difficulties were acutely felt during the Myanmar's third wave of COVID-19 which was in full swing around four months after the coup attempt and devastated the country. Given these pressures, it is not surprising that after the first few months of mass strikes and mass demonstrations, the mass nature of the CDM has changed as people are forced back to work, fled or resorted to other forms of resistance. However, this is not the end of the CDM and it has evolved. The following section outlines this evolution.

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80 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

81 Interview with a CDMer, August 2022.

## 5 Evolution of the CDM

The CDM was the first expression of resistance to the attempted coup and is the basis for the Spring Revolution. The Spring Revolution itself has developed with various facets, including the formation of three interim political entities for governance. First was the CRPH, which represents elected lawmakers from the 2020 elections, which was established in the days following the coup attempt. The CRPH is the legislative body and has passed and/or amended laws. The executive body was established in April 2021 under the name of the NUG, comprised of elected lawmakers, ethnic minority leaders and civil society representatives, while the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) is the overarching entity that directs policy and strategic direction of the NUG. However, as stated by a railway department official who joined the CDM, the formation of the NUG, CRPH and the NUCC were born out of the CDM.<sup>82</sup> It was with the trust and the endorsement of the CDMers in addition to their participation and representation, that these groups enjoy ongoing support and legitimacy of the people from the ground.

As the military junta used increasingly violent methods to suppress the CDM, and as people began to run out of resources to continue their non-cooperation in public service under the junta's control, it was inevitable that the CDM began to evolve. A mass strike cannot go on indefinitely in the face of such extreme threats and challenges and some CDMers have returned to work. A few CDMers have managed to continue their important work despite the lack of regular support, while some support and avenues for participation provided by the CRPH and the NUG have allowed some CDMers to be able to continue their resistance, not just be withdrawing their labor, but by using it to build a new Myanmar. The NUG itself is staffed and supported by CDMers. As the NUG itself has stated:

“

*CDM civil service personnel joining the NUG come from across the public sector and include senior ranks such as Deputy Director and above. These senior CDM personnel now play leading roles in NUG ministries working to provide social services to the Myanmar public.<sup>83</sup>*

”

In particular, health workers have found roles within the NUG and its various programs in liberated areas such as COVID-19 measures, online telehealth consultations or providing care for internally displaced persons (IDPs) or training for medics. By November 2022, nearly 5,000 CDM health workers were working under various resistance groups under the broader NUG umbrella according to the CDM Medical Network.<sup>84</sup> For example the makeshift hospital in a liberated area of Karenni State is staffed by CDM doctors and nurses that treats both civilians and members of the armed resistance.<sup>85</sup>

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82 Interview with a CDMer, August 2022.

83 'Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement.' *National Unity Government of Myanmar*. September 2021. Available at: [https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2021-09-17-210916\\_CDM\\_Report\\_edited-signed.pdf](https://www.burmalibrary.org/sites/burmalibrary.org/files/obl/2021-09-17-210916_CDM_Report_edited-signed.pdf)

84 Yuzana. 'Myanmar Resistance Medics on Front Line of Fight Against Military Rule.' *The Irrawaddy*. 21 November 2022. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/features/myanmar-resistance-medics-on-front-line-of-fight-against-military-rule.html>

85 'The CDM Doctor performing brain surgery amid the bullets.' *Frontier*. 17 February 2023. Available at: <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/the-cdm-doctor-performing-brain-surgery-amid-the-bullets/>

Some CDMers, including high profile members, have fled to the areas controlled by EROs and are using their skills to contribute towards building the alternative governance and service provision that the junta cannot provide and the people will not accept. Some have founded charity groups and civil society organizations, while others have become political activists or taken on advocacy roles. As this human rights defender described:

“

*Some CDMers who arrived in ethnic areas, they are helping based on their profession such as health and education. CDMers are helping with many things there; they contribute to the community there. For example, professors from universities are helping in education sectors, and it is the same for professionals from the medical sector.<sup>86</sup>*

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Another human rights defender talked about the contribution that CDM teachers provided for ethnic communities during 2021, and how CDMers taught in community-initiated schools. As this HRD described, “most CDM members contribute services with their capability and skills, although they are taking refuge here.”<sup>87</sup> This cooperation between people of different ethnic groups is a micro-practice of federalism that the Myanmar military has for so long tried to prevent.

Education in particular has been a huge part of the resistance. Many students from primary, secondary, and higher education refused to enroll at the illegal military junta-run schools, yet many of those who fled still need to put their children through school. Both online or virtual and offline schools have been set up by CDMers under the guidelines of the NUG. Community schools run by CDMers in Sagaing Region, Magwe Region, Chin State, southern Shan State, Karenni State and Karen State are now teaching students from primary to high school age. In Sagaing Region’s Myaung Township alone, there are nearly 4,000 students who are attending 27 community schools.<sup>88</sup> The NUG not only provides technical help but also security assistance for the schools operating on the ground. With the help of local people, over 600 schools have been prepared with air-raid shelters to defend from the air strike attacks from the military junta which have been particularly targeting schools.<sup>89</sup> As part of the interim education plan of the NUG, it announced a total of 33 online schools as government-recognized schools.<sup>90</sup> One prominent example is the Kaung For You School, an online learning platform established by an education officer from Mandalay Region. It was recognized by the NUG’s Education Ministry and was the biggest of its kind, with over 30,000 students enrolled as their parents refused to send them to junta schools.<sup>91</sup> However, in July 2022, leaked

86 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

87 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

88 ‘Myanmar’s Shadow Govt Operates Network of Schools in Resistance Strongholds.’ *The Irrawaddy*. 7 June 2022. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-shadow-govt-operates-network-of-schools-in-resistance-strongholds.html>

89 “နိုင်ငံတစ်ဝန်း စာသင်ကျောင်း ၆၀၀ ကျော်တွင် ဗုံးခိုကျင်းများတူးထား။” *People’s Spring*. 26 January 2023. Available at: <https://www.ludunwayoo.com/news-mm/2023/01/26/65876/>

90 “ကြားကာလ အခြေခံပညာပြည့်သူ့ပညာရေးကျောင်းများအဖြစ် အသိအမှတ်ပြုကြောင်း ကြေညာချက်(၂/၂၀၂၃)” *NUG*. Available at: <https://gov.nugmyanmar.org/my/2023/01/24/ကြားကာလအခြေခံပညာပြည့်သူ့>

91 Han Thit. ‘At least 30 teachers detained following data leak and arrest of NUG-linked school founder.’ *Myanmar Now*. 20 July 2022. Available at: <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/at-least-30-teachers-detained-following-data-leak-and-arrest-of-nug-linked-school-founder>

data regarding student lists and information on the identity of teachers resulted in the arrests of over 30 people connected to the school, as well as the founder, and the school announced a temporary closure.<sup>92</sup> There also exists an online university – Spring University – that provides access to education offering over 500 courses with over 13,876 students already enrolled at the time of writing this report.<sup>93</sup> Another online education platform that emerged out of the resistance students is the Virtual Federal University which provide online lessons in audio, video and textual formats on broad-based topics, taught by intellectuals from around the world.<sup>94</sup>

However, as with many other facets of the revolution, it is not just about defeating the military and dismantling the decades-old corrupt and oppressive military institution and its security apparatuses, but building a new Myanmar which tears down some of the old exclusions and hierarchies that reinforce militarization and dictatorship. Education is a prime example. One CDM teacher, who had to flee from her village and made her way to Lay Kay Kaw, Karen State, in 2021 before it was devastated by junta aerial attacks, spoke of these new principles of teaching. She was teaching CDM children according to a new curriculum which is a break from the top-down, rote learning style of the official Myanmar education system. She talked of how the old way of teaching taught kids just to be “followers,” not to learn how to think independently, or take responsibility. She spoke of the fear of teachers when she was a child whereas when she teaches now as part of the CDM, children are courageous, not afraid to speak out, and are learning much more. She spoke of the education system under the junta as “oppressive,” expressing hopes for the future:

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*If we had a good government, such environments should have been here for a long time. I wanted such an environment for the children who are the heroes of the future. Our country will be more developed when they are smarter and brighter.<sup>95</sup>*

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Many ethnic service providers have been providing education programs, as well as healthcare, for decades, demonstrating the already-existing federalism that ethnic groups have been practicing outside the Bamar-centric, Myanmar state-building project. In fact, since the coup attempt, such programs have been seeing a huge increase in demand, such as Karen National Union (KNU) administered Karen Education and Cultural Department schools running out of school places,<sup>96</sup> as CDMers flee to liberated ethnic areas. In Karenni State, the Karenni State Consultative Council (KSCC) has brought together political parties, EROs and CDMers to administer and govern parts of the state that the junta cannot effectively control. The presence of CDMers in the KSCC's sub-committees on education and health,<sup>97</sup> working with existing frameworks, demonstrates

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92 *Ibid.*

93 ‘Spring University Myanmar.’ Available at: <https://www.springuniversitymm.com/>

94 ‘Federal University.’ Available at: See <https://www.federaluniversity.org/>

95 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

96 "(KECD) ရဲ့ ကျောင်းတွေမှာ သတ်မှတ်ထားတဲ့ ကျောင်းသားဦးရေထက် လက်ခံရတဲ့အတွက် အခက်အခဲကြုံနေရ။" *Karen Information Center.* 15 July 2022. Available at: <https://kicnews.org/2022/06/kecdရဲ့ကျောင်းတွေမှာ-သတ်မှတ်/>

97 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

a cooperation between ethnic and Bamar forces rarely seen in either previous military regimes or the NLD-led Government of more recent years. It is vital that this form of cooperation and practice of federalism in terms of service provision and governance are not undermined by central directives from the NUG or the CRPH. The new non-junta education alternatives can add to and cooperate with ethnic administrations to build on the foundation of federalism practiced by ethnic groups for decades, in order to enact a new era of cooperation and mutual understanding in a country where the military has successfully deployed divide-and-rule tactics that exacerbated ethnic divisions and prevented any chance of national reconciliation.

In the health sector, as mentioned in the above section regarding COVID-19, while doctors and nurses refused to work for the junta, they still provided healthcare through private visits, charity hospitals and underground networks. A railway department official who joined the CDM spoke in his interview of the plans of the railway CDMers to restructure the running of the rail system in Myanmar. He spoke of how they are establishing an interim railway administration body and how they will have a vision and mission for this entity.<sup>98</sup>

The point here is that the CDM has evolved from a movement that was primarily about rejecting the military to one that is also building a new Myanmar. Rejection of the military is not a rejection of Myanmar. Whether schoolteachers, doctors, railway workers or other civil servants and elected politicians, the people are building a new Myanmar that is a break from the structures of domination, hierarchy, patriarchy, violence and exclusion that defined the Myanmar military's mono-ethnic, mono-religious Bamar Buddhist supremacist state-building efforts. Many CDMers are doing this with the help of and in cooperation with non-Bamar ethnic groups that have been governing, administering and leading in their own ethnic ancestral lands for many decades while constantly pushing back against the military's centralized and militarized Burmanization campaigns in their pursuit for a federal democracy. And while the various resistance forces and governance actors that are constructing this new Myanmar may make mistakes along the way, and not every single CDMer may be willing to make a break from the past, the inclusivity, plurality and diversity of the CDM is laying concrete foundations. The CDM has thus evolved, from a non-cooperation mass strike and demonstration movement which was defined by rejection of the military, to one which is building something in its place as part of its resistance.

The violence, livelihood pressures and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic may have reduced the visible numbers of people on the streets but its dynamism has allowed it to adapt and to evolve, overcoming these problems. The numbers of visibly striking public sector workers are less, but the commitment and resolve of the movement remain and are being channeled into a forward-looking resistance. And assistance and support from well-resourced allies and friends who wish to see democracy in Myanmar can hasten the demise of the Myanmar military and quicken the advent of a new Myanmar that the CDM is striving to build.

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98 Interview with a CDMer, August 2022.

## 6 Difficult Choices for CDMers

The non-violent principle of the CDM has a long tradition in civil resistance against colonialism, military dictatorship and other structures of oppression and sources of injustice. Anna King, who analyzed the CDM in the historical context of non-violent resistance, points out that nonviolent disobedience, with its lineages in the writings and actions of Thoreau, Ghandi and Sharp, is ethically a more peaceful and moral resistance strategy than resorting to violence. Anna King also points to scholars who argue in more practical terms, that “strategic nonviolence is more likely to achieve regime change, lead to peace settlements and foster democracy than violence.”<sup>99</sup> While this may be true in certain contexts, in Myanmar, the readiness to use extreme violence and the real threats to personal, family and community safety that the Myanmar military deliberately employs, means that non-violent disobedience, manifest in the CDM, is just one pillar of resistance. Faced with the threat and actuality of extreme violence from the military outlined above, the Spring Revolution quickly evolved into multi-pronged strategy, with armed resistance in the name of self-defense a key component that foils the military junta’s attempts to rule. The NUG’s Foreign Minister, Zin Mar Aung, commented on the NUG’s declaration of the “people’s defensive war” in September 2021 by noting the lack of effective international pressure:

“

*We have people who are continuing the peaceful protests under the leadership of the strike committees, as well as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) against military rule. The CDM and the non-violence movement aren’t stopping, while our political efforts [to get recognition and to reject the military regime] via international pressure and diplomatic channels continue. But these efforts are not enough. Therefore, we have to put some momentum into the resistance movement. This is not a shift from a non-violent movement to violence. It is just that we will use all possible means to restore democracy.*<sup>100</sup>

”

This non-armed movement is still ongoing and undergirds the Spring Revolution, both in the practical sense of not letting the junta function as a governance actor, but also in a moral sense due to its inclusivity, and the principled sacrifice of its participants. However, given the extreme security threats, livelihood difficulties and other hardships, there was no way that the same amount of people could continue an indefinite strike. Many still do, but some others, due to security or financial difficulties, are back in the junta’s controlled workplace. As a recent report on the CDM by Myanmar research group, Nyan Lynn Thit Analytica points out, there are many people who are working in the civil service but still aid the revolution in any way that they can, whether providing information, working slowly or contributing financially.<sup>101</sup>

99 King, Anna, S. ‘Myanmar’s Coup d’état and the Struggle for Federal Democracy and Inclusive Government.’ *Religions*. 13. p.2. June 2022. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/13/7/594>

100 ‘Declaration of War Necessary as International Pressure Fails: Myanmar Shadow Government.’ *The Irrawaddy*. 9 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/in-person/declaration-of-war-necessary-as-international-pressure-fails-myanmar-shadow-govt.html>

101 ‘Revealing the Voices of Civil Disobedience Movement.’ *Nyan Lynn Thit Analytica*. 1(2). November 2022. Available at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1A5Axyv6hl1z1nSu51kpSNtAO820Xvdqr/view>

Nyan Lynn Thit Analytica's research points to the mental struggle and guilt that these people face, as well as social pressure from the resistance, as they balance their support for the CDM with the welfare of their families.<sup>102</sup> The financial pressures are sometimes simply too huge for some people to continue without an income when their families are in need. CDMers are unsure about what will happen for their future or that of their children, including how to provide education and healthcare. They are stuck in limbo, with no security, limited regular financial support, no income and not many alternatives. They often have to live apart from their families. And while funding from the NUG and the private donations have helped some people, there is a massive gap between what is needed for hundreds of thousands of civil servants engaged in a non-violent disobedience movement who have lost their income and homes, and what has been able to be provided so far. As one interviewee, a representative of an ethnic human rights organization stated when lamenting the lack of support from the international community:

“

*If the argument is to encourage non-violence struggle, they [the international community] should be giving support to the CDM. We have this armed revolution because the international community has failed to support the protest movement... If the international community's position is to support peaceful means to achieve revolutionary goal, change and democracy, they should be thinking about how best to support the CDM movement and provide the resources that the CDM needs. The way the international community is responding to the peaceful movement demonstrates a double standard or irony.<sup>103</sup>*

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Some interviewees, particularly those who work for human rights organizations, civil society organizations, or as human rights defenders and political activists have stated that there is a reluctance among some international donors, particularly embassies and bilateral donors, to provide funding for the CDM. This is because it is deemed political or they are worried about money going into the hands of the armed resistance. One human rights defender, who, prior to the coup attempt was working with youth on the environmental impact of natural resource extraction projects, voiced his frustration, “I am really upset when I hear that the donors can't support the CDMers. If they don't support these people who are fighting against the junta in a non-violent way for their own, what are they going to do?”<sup>104</sup>

A lack of regular support to the CDM means that people either struggle to continue their non-cooperation with the junta, give up and return to work under the junta, join the armed struggle, or try and resettle in a third country without having the chance to contribute to alleviate the crisis from ethnic border and liberated areas and to build a new federal democratic Myanmar. Therefore, supporting the non-armed resistance pillar of the Spring Revolution – the CDM – must be placed at the center of the international community's attention, recognizing their vital importance in the peoples' fight for democracy in Myanmar to win.

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102 *Ibid.*

103 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

104 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.



## 7 CDMers are Human Rights Defenders that the International Community Must Support

Given the essential funding needs of the CDM, it is imperative for allies in the international community who wish to support human rights and democracy in Myanmar to reassess their support for the Spring Revolution by viewing the CDM as human rights defenders according to the internationally-recognized definition of such. Article One of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders states that:

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*Everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, to promote and to strive for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms at the national and international levels.<sup>105</sup>*

”

This is exactly what individuals within the CDM and the CDM as a collective movement are doing – striving for the protection and realization of human rights and fundamental freedoms. The interviews of HRDs and CDMers that are part of the methodology of this report reveal the myriad ways that HRDs and CDMers are connected and mutually depend on and support each other in their collective defense of their rights and democracy. Furthermore, the lines between what is an HRD, which international donors are happy to support, and the CDM, which some donors have hesitancy to support, are often blurred, with people adopting multiple complex identities. For example, a student who also works for a high-profile human rights activist organization supports the work of HRDs through her organization, but also withdrew her attendance from university as part of the CDM. This organization provided support to the CDM through safe houses, secure communications and transportation, as do many other CSOs and HRDs.

In the initial days of the CDM and the demonstrations, the use of social media, to announce protest actions such as silent strikes, was and still is vital and silent strikes are still occurring. HRDs and activists have the experience of organizing such actions, have networks throughout the country to leverage, and have large public followings on social media with which to disseminate information on protest actions.<sup>106</sup> Human rights organizations, CSOs and HRDs also support CDMers financially, by raising money, collecting donations securely, distributing these funds through their networks and providing basic essential needs. Many organizations have set up humanitarian programs to better organize and implement this work.<sup>107</sup> Medical assistance by community-based organizations (CBOs) has also been provided. One representative from an ethnic women’s CBO spoke of the particular support they provide to female CDMers or to women whose husbands are CDMers, especially pregnant women and new mothers such as clinic visit costs.<sup>108</sup>

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105 UN Declaration on Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders). A/RES/53/144. 8 March 1999. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declaration.pdf>

106 Interview with a CDMer, August 2022.

107 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

108 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022

Another spoke of the costs of childbirth in southeast Myanmar being provided by a long-standing ethnic women's CBO.<sup>109</sup> Safe houses, emergency transport and communication, and online security training have also been provided to CDMers, not only by HRDs and human rights organizations but also by CDMers themselves. In this regard, CDMers have become part of these programs, not just as beneficiaries, but as change agents doing the active work of human rights organizations and HRDs.

For traditional HRDs, they also have long-standing experience on advocacy, and help channel the needs, concerns and realities of the ground situation of CDM to the outside world. They collate and present documentation of the abuses and atrocities committed by the Myanmar military to a broader international audience, working to keep a spotlight on a crisis that the world seems to be largely forgetting.<sup>110</sup> They also keep records and information of the numbers, needs and conditions for CDMers. Their work is of course extremely dangerous, with them being particularly targeted, but their role in amplifying the situation of the CDM is proof of their inter-connectivity and mutual dependence which is an important aspect of the Spring Revolution.

It is also important to highlight the role of ethnic organizations in supporting the CDM. When CDMers from the central towns and cities fled, many went to border areas, such as southeast Myanmar, where the KNU control swathes of territory. Thus, many CDMers have become IDPs as those who had to flee their homes and became displaced due to the military junta's persecution and violence. Such IDPs, who become evicted or forced out of their homes due to politically motivated violence, added to the already existing hundreds of thousands of armed conflict-induced IDPs from years of active fighting in ethnic areas and are also in need of access to humanitarian aid.

EROs such as the KNU have openly welcomed the CDMers and others fleeing the junta's violence.<sup>111</sup> For example the KNU released a statement within a month of the coup attempt offering to provide sanctuary to CDMers and establishing arrival centers in all seven KNU districts.<sup>112</sup> Not only have they provided sanctuary but ethnic civil society groups have been playing a key role in providing places to live, a measure of security, and some resources for them to continue their struggle and maintain connections with their home towns. This in turn allows them to continue their movement. Similar to the students of 1988 who fled to liberated ethnic areas in Kachin, Mon, Karenni and Karen States, communities of displaced CDMers are able to continue their non-violent resistance through the help of long-standing ethnic and border-based CBOs and CSOs creating different programs including for health, education and income generation. Dealing with the sanitation, shelter, food and urgent evacuation needs of fleeing CDMers, as well as those displaced ethnic populations due to airstrikes and heavy shelling as the junta targets ethnic areas, these CBOs and CSOs are vital in providing essential life-saving humanitarian support. They can also leverage

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109 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

110 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

111 'KNU Principles of Current Situation.' *KNU*. 3 September 2021. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/Doothahtu/photos/a.112872243644424/364927725105540/?rdc=1&rd>

112 'KNU Offer Anti-Coup Protestors its Protection – Karen Civil Society Alliance Calls for Ethnic Armed Groups to Unite and Foreign Embassies Denounce Military Coup.' *Karen News*. 16 February 2021. Available at: <https://karennews.org/2021/02/knu-offer-anti-coup-protestors-its-protection-karen-civil-society-alliance-calls-for-ethnic-armed-groups-to-unite-and-foreign-embassies-denounce-military-coup/> and 'Military Atrocities and Civilian Resistance: Testimonies of injustice, insecurity and violence in Southeast Myanmar under the 2021 Coup.' *Karen Human Rights Group*. November 2021. Available at: <https://www.khrg.org/sites/khrg.org/files/report-docs/thematic-english.pdf>

their connections with local governance actors, such as KNU authorities, to coordinate this humanitarian response, funnel funding to address the urgent needs of those displaced, whether local ethnic communities or fleeing CDMers. This is not limited to the southeast, but the northwest of Myanmar, including Chin State and across the border in India, is also a destination for fleeing CDMers, HRDs, CSOs and activists.

While support of, and private donations from, the Myanmar diaspora, as well as business communities and individuals within Myanmar, or certain NGOs and foundations and charity donors help, there is simply not enough resources to respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by the junta's violence. Regular funding streams from international governments and funding agencies or UN have not been forthcoming, and the assistance that HRDs and CSOs are able to provide to CDMers is not consistent enough in proportion to the great needs.<sup>113</sup>

This speaks to the need for international donors to recognize and support for the CDM by treating the CDMers as HRDs who are protecting and promoting the fundamental rights and freedoms of the Myanmar people. This can be done through cross-border channels, as this is the most effective way to help those most in need. Cross-border means that aid can be funneled to CDMers and groups working to support the CDMers and displaced communities impacted by the military's atrocities in many areas of Myanmar. This can be done through informal but immediate and effective methods of delivery using local networks. It is a people-to-people solidarity approach. Furthermore, these methods have been tried and tested and proved to be the most feasible and effective way in the past two years to provide assistance to different parts of Myanmar beyond ethnic border lands.

However, as well as recognizing and treating CDMers as HRDs, there is another dynamic that must inform an international approach. Aid programs and financial assistance must not go through any junta department, agency or other entity obliged to seek permission from and submit reports to the junta in order to ensure the "do no harm" principle. As highlighted in a previous Progressive Voice report on the violence and humanitarian needs in the dryzone of Sagaing, Magwe and Mandalay Regions - *Setting the Tinderbox Alight* - the junta and its proxies "repeatedly block, confiscate, destroy and manipulate the distribution of aid for their political and strategic advantage" and has "also seized medical facilities and continuously attacked humanitarian aid and medical workers."<sup>114</sup> Unimpeded access to communities in need through the junta, including those CDMers who have become IDPs, is simply not possible and, given how little aid will actually reach those communities, not effective.

Additionally, the advantage the junta will gain from partnering with international humanitarian organizations renders any official engagement with the junta as not just unethical, but enabling the junta's continuation of atrocity crimes. Given this option, the alternative is to support the decentralized networks of small-scale assistance and support that local people's organizations, including those established and run by the CDM, are able to provide. They have commitment, expertise, and trust from the communities as well a proven record that they have the ability to deliver aid. Yet what is lacking is the political will and subsequent practical logistical support from international donors in addition to sufficient resources. This may mean that donors that are open to loosening their strict reporting requirements – the absurdity of

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113 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

114 'Setting the Tinderbox Alight - The Humanitarian Crisis in Myanmar's Dryzone.' *Progressive Voice*. 31 August 2022. Available at: <https://progressivevoicemyanmar.org/2022/08/31/setting-the-tinderbox-alight-the-humanitarian-crisis-in-myanmars-dry-zone/>

needing three quotes for transportation through a conflict zone is an ongoing reality some donors insist on – and to acknowledge that local providers are best placed to implement and deliver humanitarian assistance. As one ethnic CSO representative put it:

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*There are still many low-profile ways that people can still bring in big amount of support for the people [who are in need]; of course it is not a one-time thing, we have to bring it at different times. If you don't have a difficult procurement policy and make things difficult for reporting, there are ways people can bring in support. Cross border doesn't just occur on the border; we can bring it deep inside ethnic territories.*<sup>115</sup>

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As much as CDMers are HRDs, traditional human rights activists and HRDs are also a part of the CDM. They depend on each other and are complementing each other's work in pursuit of their collective vision of a federal democratic Myanmar. They are playing a key role in facilitation, support and networking. As one activist stated, “HRDs, they are at the core of the movement... HRDs may or may not be standing at the front, but they are playing a very important supporting role at the back [of the movement]. The junta knows this very well, that's why they are targeting HRDs.”<sup>116</sup> And while HRDs, CSOs and other local networks and organizations are doing their utmost to support the CDM and others who have encountered the junta's violence, these CDMers simply do not have the material and practical support from the international donor community. Yet, they are not relying solely on international donors. As one CDMer put it, “We are not waiting for the water drop from the sky, we are digging our own well to get water. Rather than relying on the international community, we want to rely on each other.”<sup>117</sup> However, the CDMer did go on to say that with support from the international community, they could defeat the military much quicker than the long, drawn-out campaigns of violence which are showing no signs of ending soon.

The argument here then is that CDMers are HRDs and they are in need of urgent support. As per Article 5 of the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders:

*For the purpose of promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, everyone has the right, individually and in association with others, at the national and international levels:*

- (a) To meet or assemble peacefully;*
- (b) To form, join and participate in non-governmental organizations, associations or groups;*
- (c) To communicate with non-governmental or intergovernmental organizations.*<sup>118</sup>

CDMers are striving for the fundamental freedoms of the people of Myanmar as per the above definition, meeting and assembling peacefully, forming groups or associations and attempting to communicate

115 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

116 Interview with a HRD, July 2022.

117 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

118 UN Declaration on Declaration on the Right and Responsibility of Individuals, Groups and Organs of Society to Promote and Protect Universally Recognized Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (The UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders). A/RES/53/144 8 March 1999.  
Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Defenders/Declaration/declaration.pdf>

the plight of the Myanmar people to the outside world. Furthermore, they have the expertise, capacity, networks and experience that can channel international support to the various needs of the movement, whether material, security, health, education or vocational training. Thus given their needs, their capacity and role, the CDMers must be recognized, treated and supported as equally as HRDs.

## **8** Conclusion

This report has summarized the emergence of the CDM, its success in preventing the junta from succeeding in its attempted power grab in spite of two years of its persistent terror campaign, and the challenges the movement faces, particularly related to livelihood pressures and security. It has also outlined the evolution of the CDM, how the various governing entities of the resistance – the NUG, CRPH and the NUCC – are underpinned by the civil disobedience movement, and how it is part of constructing a new Myanmar. As one CDMer said in an interview, “Everyone is determined to fight till the end even if they can’t finish during their time, they hope that their new generation will enjoy the freedom.”<sup>119</sup>

This report has also highlighted the need for the international community to recognize and treat the CDMers as HRDs under the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders and outlined how the international community can support the CDM. The CDM networks as well as the foundation of ethnic and community-based and civil society organizations have the capacity and networks to support the education, health and humanitarian needs of a population under attack from an illegal brutal military junta. There is a widespread and strong sense in Myanmar that the international community is not providing enough support for its determined fight for a federal democracy that would dismantle one of the most violent military institutions in the world. The world must both recognize and provide political and material support to the CDM in their heroic struggle for democracy and human rights, and to end military tyranny that is ongoing despite the atrocities that they face.

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119 Interview with a CDMer, July 2022.

## **9** Recommendations

### **To the International Community and Donors**

- Recognize the unprecedented historic role that the CDM has played in preventing the Myanmar military succeeding in its illegal and brutal coup attempt;
- Unequivocally support the CDM and the Spring Revolution's desires to bring about a genuine federal democracy in Myanmar;
- Recognize the CDMers as human rights defenders as per the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders;
- Do not partner, directly or indirectly, with or assist the Myanmar military junta in the provision of humanitarian aid in Myanmar;
- Provide flexible funding to CDMers for their protection and emergency needs as well as to strengthen their work in building a new federal democratic Myanmar. This can be in the form of direct support to their newly established organizations, networks or channeled through previously-established local civil society organizations, ethnic service providers, EROs and networks of human rights defenders, as well as the NUG;
- Support the provision of vocational and skills training that enhance employment opportunities to CDMers, both inside and outside Myanmar;
- Provide funds directly and flexibly to local civil society organizations, networks of human rights defenders, humanitarian organizations, and service provision ministries and departments of the NUG and EROs, so that they are able to respond effectively to the humanitarian crisis on the ground. Cross-border aid does not stop in ethnic border areas and with support and funding, it can reach CDMers throughout Myanmar as has been tried and tested effectively; and
- Relax onerous reporting requirements to allow civil society and local humanitarian organizations, including those that are unregistered, to focus on and effectively and timely respond to the emergency situation at hand.

### **To UN Agencies**

- Unequivocally support the CDM and the Spring Revolution's desires to bring about a genuine federal democracy in Myanmar including stopping lending any legitimacy to the illegal junta;
- Do not partner with or assist the Myanmar military junta in the provision of humanitarian aid;
- Call on the international humanitarian community to consult and coordinate with the NUG and EROs to support the provision of humanitarian aid by local humanitarian aid organizations, civil society organizations and ethnic health and service provision organizations including through cross-border channels; and

- Call on bordering countries, especially Thailand, India and Bangladesh, to allow the delivery of humanitarian aid into Myanmar and provide protection to those who are fleeing from the junta's violence.

### **To NUG, EROs, NUCC and local ethnic governance and representative bodies**


- Develop and ensure the implementation of laws and policies that are in full compliance with Myanmar's international obligations for the protection of human rights as outlined in the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders;
- Advocate the UN and international community for the protection of CDMers under the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders;
- Increase and sustain support to the CDMers who continue with their involvement in the Spring Revolution, both politically and financially through local CDM chapters, committees, and entities that have formed, in order to recognize their unique contribution to the Spring Revolution and the struggle for a genuine federal democracy; and
- Develop and implement a comprehensive program that will strengthen the CDM to continue as a key pillar of the revolution including by creating comprehensive capacity building programs and employment opportunities for the CDMers, both inside and outside the country, beyond those working under the NUG.




## Contact Information

### Progressive Voice

 <http://www.progressivevoicemyanmar.org/>

 <https://www.facebook.com/progressivevoice>

 @PVamplify

 [info@progressive-voice.org](mailto:info@progressive-voice.org)