

Myanmar's coup from the eyes of ethnic minorities

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In the early days after the Myanmar military seized power on 1 February, many people from ethnic minority groups viewed the coup as a fight between the military and the NLD, who they regard as having failed to promote the rights of ethnic minorities during its first term in government. I believe that, driven by their resentment towards the NLD, the coup reminded many ethnic people of their darkest hours under NLD government. Many do not feel belonging to the Union and believe their lives and positions would remain largely the same whether the country is ruled by the military or the NLD. Some ethnic armed groups such as the Kachin Independent Army (KIA) have suggested that they consider the present political conflict will make [little difference](#) to them.

The 2020 election was another landslide victory for the NLD, much like the 2015 election, at the expense of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). But it was also one of [disappointment for ethnic parties](#), who won only 10% of seats at the national legislature. While many people chose the NLD to deter dominance by a USDP-military alliance, the result destroyed any dreams of [a coalition government](#) and let down expectations of a “[kingmaker](#)” role for ethnic parties. Many ethnic parties and the people they represent perceive they have been [marginalised and excluded](#) by the NLD party in many ways, not least the peace process with ethnic armed groups. Although the NLD sought dialogue with some ethnic parties to join a national unity government after the 2020 election, others [were excluded](#).

Four ethnic party leaders have accepted positions in the [State Administrative Council](#) (SAC), the 15-member national governing body formed a day after the coup that is composed of military officials headed by military chief-cum-coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. While other ethnic parties refused the military's offer, among those who took it up was the Arakan National Party (ANP). The ANP's grievances lie in the NLD's appointment of one of its own to Chief Minister of Rakhine State after the 2015 election, despite the ethnic party winning the majority of the state's seats at the polls. Past statements from the ANP have highlighted the NLD's lack of engagement with the party throughout crises in Rakhine State, the NLD's exclusion of the ANP from post-2020 dialogue, and the NLD's refusal to include all of Rakhine State in polling during the 2020 election despite urges by the Arakan Army and support by the military.

In the early days of the protests, many protestors wore red (a colour symbolising the NLD), held the party's flags and clutched photos of state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi. These images strengthened the narrative of the coup as a fight between the military and the NLD. Among the protesters' primary demands were the release of Aung San Suu Kyi, president Win Myint and other detained leaders, and the materialisation of the results of the 2020 election by holding a parliamentary session. But this vision held by the majority Bamar protestors does not resonate with many ethnic people, even those who oppose the military coup.

To be clear, the military's claim of [mass electoral fraud](#) in the 2020 election as the justification for

the coup and promises of a “free and fair multi-party election” within a year has not received buy-in from a large number of ethnic people and ethnic political parties. Though they may not be supportive of the NLD, many also [feel betrayed](#) by the decision of some ethnic leaders to join the SAC.

Within this political framing, many ethnic people who want to stand in solidarity with those fighting against the coup face mental barriers and a sense of dissonance in raising their voices. To complicate matters, the military has co-opted some individuals from ethnic parties and armed groups through the conferral of positions in newly set up administrative councils at different levels of governance, creating further division and tension among the ethnic parties and their supporters.

Yet despite the grievances against the NLD, many ethnic minority people have been unable to ignore what is happening to their country and have begun showing their solidarity with those who are fighting against the coup. Not only are they participating in protests in major cities such as Yangon and Mandalay, localised protests are appearing rapidly in many [ethnic areas](#) such as the Kachin, Kayah, Karen, Chin, Rakhine, Mon and Shan states.

These latter protests differ, however, in that they commonly call for an end to the coup and dictatorship, an abolition of the 2008 constitution and the building of a federal union based on democracy, equality and rights to self-determination—demands which are not couched in terms of the NLD. Protesters in these states mostly [wear black and hold the flags of their ethnic groupings](#) rather than NLD flags and portraits of Aung San Suu Kyi.

On 11 February, the fifth day of protests in Yangon, the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN) was formed by ethnic youth representing 27 ethnic groups of Myanmar. This movement is receiving much traction. That day, the Committee organised a march in Yangon joined by over 5,000 people including students and young activists, with the majority of the protesters from ethnic minorities. Youth from different ethnic groups came together, holding banners and signs featuring colours symbolic of their ethnicities. One voice crossing racial and ethnic lines, their consolidated demands were clear: end dictatorship, abolish the 2008 constitution, build a Federal Democratic Union and release all who are unjustly detained.

People from ethnic minorities standing against the military are mainly concentrating on institutional change, in contrast with NLD supporters focused on the release of party leaders and the formation of government—which the former think of as oriented towards a return to the status quo. Many people from ethnic minorities instead ponder a political system in which there is equality and self-determination. They consider the 2008 constitution as worth no more than the paper that it is written on, as it has failed to guarantee equal rights while embedding the military power and its control. They believe the coup provides an opportunity to abolish the 2008 Constitution and create a new one guided by federal democratic principles.

While both movements call for an end to the coup, there is a difference in visions: majority Bamar protesters support NLD leaders, while ethnic minorities call for building a federal democratic union. Yet in a country with deep divisions across ethnic lines, initiatives such as the GSCN—the effort of representatives from different ethnic groups including the majority Bamar—offer the possibility of finding common ground in messaging and developing shared strategies for restoring democratic rule. Meanwhile protesters in Mandalay as well as ethnic states such as Kachin and Mon have begun to face a [violence response](#) by the police. As different as our interests and visions are, in the fight against dictatorship, we all need to be aligned. How can we work together to end the fear and pain we are living with every day?

New Mandala has verified the identity and credentials of the author and allowed anonymity due to

the concerning and rapidly changing events in Myanmar.

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