

Targets of Oppression and Scrutiny: Being a University Teacher in Military-Ruled Myanmar

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Moon (pseudonym) explores how university teachers factor into the revolution against military dictatorship.

As the military takeover in Myanmar enters its ninth month of oppression and threat, university teachers committed to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) are facing more difficulties and challenges. Most of the university teachers chose this vocation for its stability and prestige. However, Myanmar's coup is making university teachers' lives unthinkably difficult. Therefore, this article, based on open-ended survey research with university teachers participating in CDM, [1] will explore the pathways that university teachers are using to overthrow the military regime and the challenges they have faced since the military coup.

This article is structured around Matthew Mullen's argument that democratic change in Myanmar developed around three pathways: contentious politics; everyday resistance; and reconstructive politics. I use Mullen's 'pathways' as a theoretical framework to explore how university teachers participate in the revolution against military dictatorship. The first pathway (contentious politics) entails people organizing and publicly challenging political targets. The second pathway (everyday resistance) describes how people in a personal capacity are engaging in subtle behaviors on a daily basis to subvert military rule. The third pathway (reconstructive politics) describes how people try to change the situation around them by creating new opportunities. I argue that through these three pathways Myanmar's university teachers undermine the junta's plan to use education as a site of normalizing military rule.

Contentious politics: university teachers and the CDM

After the coup on 1st February 2021, thousands of university teachers and school teachers, doctors and nurses across Myanmar joined the CDM. Soon after the military coup, some CDM teachers and students in various universities (including Dagon University, Mandalay University, Yadanarbon University, Technological Universities, Yangon University of Education, among others) staged a rally called the "Red Ribbon Campaign" in front of their respective universities, where they displayed the three-finger salute popularized by Thailand's protesters. University teachers also joined in street protests by wearing teachers' uniforms until the end of February and early March. The military targeted these university teachers in their crackdowns.

Although university teachers cannot participate in strikes and demonstrations any longer because of arrests by the military, many are still participating in the CDM. When asked about why she participated in the CDM, an associate professor at Mandalay University said "I participate in the CDM to reject military coup and get truth and justice by means of the CDM." A tutor at Mandalay University said "I joined the CDM in order to end military rule, to show our disobedience against any forms of the junta and to reflect what we [university teachers] can do for our future generations."

In early May, the state-run newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar announced that the Education Ministry would reopen 134 universities on 6 May, demanding that teachers arrive on campuses on 3 May to prepare for teaching. Owing to fears about how the military would treat dissenting educators, some university teachers ended their commitment to the CDM when universities reopened.

“Some university teachers have already withdrawn from the CDM and come to class because of the threats made by the military” said a lecturer. Another lecturer said “I have withdrawn from the CDM to protect my family.” Many university teachers are returning to their respective universities, worried that they could lose their job and with it the income that their families rely on. Other CDM teachers think that those who suspended their involvement in the CDM lack the commitment necessary to end military rule.

On 6 May when universities reopened, university teachers who were still actively participating in the CDM had their jobs suspended by the military. Some university teachers that were suspended eventually returned to work, where they had to sign a pledge not to take part in the CDM. People in Myanmar are reluctant to speak up because they are living under the surveillance of military intelligence personnel and informers. Those who act against the military risk torture, long-term imprisonment and being treated as outcasts for life. To protect themselves and their families, Myanmar people participate in creating the silence that constrains many aspects of their lives.

On 21 May, the military issued removal letters for CDM teachers. However, many university teaching staff did not return to work despite various challenges and difficulties. In the words of an assistant professor at Mandalay University, CDM teachers believe that “CDM is very effective for overthrowing military dictatorship because until now governmental control or governance is not functioning all over the country”. Moreover, a tutor at Mandalay University added, “to some extent, it’s effective in overthrowing the military dictatorship. Even now, most of the students and teachers are not following the military’s rules to attend the classes. That’s absolutely what makes the junta look foolish.” Another tutor at Mandalay University answered “CDM is one of the most effective tools to overthrow the military regime, especially in challenging the military regime’s legitimacy.” Thus, many university teachers firmly determined that they will do CDM to the end.

Everyday resistance: other ways that university teachers challenge the junta

In addition to the CDM, university teachers are also using other ways which can overthrow the military regime. For instance, they refuse to pay taxes, boycott military products, and participate on social media. An associate professor at the Yangon University of Distance Education said “besides the CDM, I support the CDMers as much as I can by collecting the information and help them join the organizations they need”. A lecturer at Mandalay University answered “to reject the dictator, I don’t pay the municipal tax, don’t use the military products and don’t give back the government loan, etc.” A tutor at Mandalay University added “I act as a keyboard warrior on social media and also support the CDMers and the People Defense Force (PDF) as much as I can.” Another lecturer at Mandalay University said “I don’t pay electricity fee, I disobey the junta’s orders, and I share posts on social media to shame the military regime.” Thus, CDM university teachers also challenge the junta by using subtle tactics that subvert the junta.

Reconstructive politics: engaging in federal education with the NUG

Some university teachers are also participating in online educational activities with the National University Government (NUG). The NUG is working on plans to build a parallel education system for students who do not want to study at junta-controlled universities, in order to prevent the coup regime from governing and building legitimacy. Ja Htoi Pan, the Deputy Education Minister under the NUG, said “the NUG will first focus on an interim education plan for final year university students and Master’s students.”

Since then, universities have formed the University Interim Council, with student representatives and teacher representatives, to implement the NUG's education plans. An associate professor at Yangon University of Distance Education said, "I am preparing for online education and collecting the information of the CDMers to join with the NUG." A lecturer at Mandalay University answered, "now I am trying to build capacity by attending online classes under the support of the NUG." Thus, CDM university teachers are engaging in parallel education with the NUG to create new federal educational opportunities for students. This demonstrates reconstructive politics, or the creation of new opportunities as a form of resistance.

Challenges faced by university teachers since the military coup

Since the military coup, university teachers who committed to the CDM faced various challenges and difficulties. At least 90% of students and teachers joined the CDM before university reopened and many have been forced by the military to return to universities. State-run newspapers and television report that around 20 people a day were issued arrest warrants, including education staff who participated in the CDM throughout April. Teachers from various townships taking part in protests against the coup have been charged under section 505 (a) of the criminal code, which makes it a crime to circulate any statement, rumor or report which could cause any military person to fail to carry out his duties. Hundreds of rectors, lecturers and teachers have been charged under 505 (a) and could be imprisoned for a maximum of three years if found guilty. At least a hundred educators have been detained. Door-to-door searches have forced many teachers and civil servants to go into hiding.

On the other hand, on April 26th, the NUG announced that they would blacklist 32 educators who had threatened or coerced CDM participants. The NUG also released the following statement: "Non-CDMers are betraying the country and they will be removed when the people's government takes back power". Some NUG supporters also posted on social media the names and pictures of non-CDM university teachers and added harsh comments in the name of social punishment.

Under this difficult situation for university teachers, there are growing concerns about the future, as university teachers play a vital role not only in providing high quality education but also in developing the human resources of the nation. University teachers described their difficulties and challenges of participating in the CDM as follows. A lecturer at Mandalay University said "I can't live in one stable place as I am worried about arrest and persecution by the military as well as the lack of income and living difficulty. But I overcome these difficulties through my willingness to win the revolution. Therefore, I am firmly determined not to return to work." An associate professor at Mandalay University answered, "there are many challenges that I faced in participating in the CDM such as insecurity, fear of arrest, and removal order." Moreover, she added that "temporary dismissal and removal order are challenges that I face because university teacher is my vocation. But this is the end of the military coup in our generation and so I decided to participate in the CDM to the end despite challenges."

Despite the determination of these educators, it is important to understand the serious challenges university teachers face, including threats to their safety and livelihoods. A tutor at Mandalay University reported "I face three main challenges by participating in the CDM. The first challenge is living difficulty as I do not receive my regular salary and it makes our living difficult sometimes. The second challenge is safety - we have to stay in a safer place due to arbitrary detention of CDM teachers. The final third challenge is that of emotional attacks because even though we participate in CDM, sometimes, most people near us don't support the CDM and even discourage us. We don't ask for much help from our neighbors but just for some words of support like 'we will win one day, stay strong!'" She also added that "I feel depressed sometimes as there is no work or income but I feel proud to stand against injustice and I continue my life with the perception that I did what I should do for the public." Thus, offering moral support is also vital for CDM teachers.

There have also been complications regarding the loans that university teachers have received. A lecturer at Mandalay University reported “while the National League for Democracy (NLD) government was still in power, the NLD government gave loans that were equal to two months of salary for university teachers. The NUG said that university teachers do not need to give back loan. But the military dictatorship said that they will prosecute CDM teachers who don’t repay the loans. That threatens all CDMers.” Moreover, university teachers who are participating in educational activities with the NUG described that they have internet and communication difficulties and also fear for personal security.

Overall, the main issue for CDM teachers is security. They face fear of arrest and threat by 505 (a) and thus many are living in hiding. The loss of a regular salary and a job they loved creates many difficulties for CDM teachers. Although CDM teachers sometimes feel depressed because of discouragement by neighbors and no income, they overcome these difficulties with a strong willingness to win the revolution.

Support for university teachers participating in the CDM

There are many local, regional, and national support groups like universities’ CDM support teams and the CRPH-CDM support team which are trying to provide financially for the CDMers. University teachers hold a variety of opinions about the financial support they have received while participating in the CDM. A lecturer at Mandalay University answered “I am satisfied with the supporting groups as they support as much as they can even though there are many difficulties. For instance, the military tries to disturb and block the supporting groups.” An associate professor at Mandalay University said, “I didn’t join the CDM with the expectation that I would be as well supported as we have been, so I am satisfied with how much support people have given us.” Although there are support groups which are trying to provide for the CDMers, there are still some teachers falling through the gaps. A tutor at Mandalay University responded, “I am not satisfied with support as teachers in rural areas do not have enough financial support from the support groups. Even if some CDMers receive support, it is not enough for their living costs.”

There seems to be a big difference between the CDMers who are well off economically and those who are not. Although the loss of regular salary may not be as big of a problem for the CDMers who can rely on savings and support from their families, the CDMers who lack this security face more challenges due to loss of their regular salary. It is also difficult for the CDMers to find another job. Knowing that the CDMers will eventually return to their old jobs makes employers reluctant to hire CDMers over other candidates looking for permanent positions.

As there is no regular income during this period, university teachers are trying to survive with the help of their family, or by living off savings or making more through irregular self-employment, like starting online shops. A lecturer at Mandalay University said “as I am single, my parents support me. For another job, as I got traditional medicine diploma certificate in 2001, I am trying to produce a medicine product to sell.” A tutor at Mandalay University answered “I try to survive by living with money I saved throughout the year and I have the plan to start working a new job but at the present I can’t do anything due to COVID-19 pandemic and political instability.” A lecturer at Yadanarbon University said, “I am running online shops and also my parents are able to support me.” It was found that although CDMers are facing difficulties, they never regretted their choice: they made up their mind to commit to CDM to the end.

University teachers also recommended various ways to overthrow the military regime, encompassing international action, donations to the People’s Defence Forces (PDFs), and the involvement of the ethnic armed organisations. They all stress unity for the cause. A tutor at Mandalay University suggested “international forces are crucial to overthrow the dictatorship. Also, the international actors should discuss Myanmar affairs and take action.” Another tutor at Mandalay University

described “donating to the CDM and PDF and persuading military officers and police officers to cooperate in the CDM should be continued to overthrow the military dictatorship.” A lecturer at Mandalay University said “now under the NUG government, Generation Z are trying to fight against military dictatorship by taking up arms and attending training under KNU, KIA, and other ethnic groups. They have a strong desire to eradicate the military dictatorship, so we are heavily reliant on Generation Z and believe that we will win.” An associate professor at Mandalay University also suggested “we must unite each other to overthrow the military dictatorship and we need to continue participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement until we achieve this revolution.”

Conclusion

University teachers, who are at the heart of political activism, are prime targets for oppression and prosecution by the junta. Despite oppression by the junta, university teachers are using three of Matthew Mullen’s pathways to overthrow the military dictatorship. The first pathway they use is contentious politics such as participating in strikes, and the CDM. The second pathway is everyday resistance such as disobedience to the military’s orders, a refusal to pay municipal tax and electricity fees, boycotts of military-related products, donating to the PDF and CDMers, and speaking out on social media. The third pathway is reconstructive politics such as participating in a parallel education plan under the NUG. Thus, we can say that teachers have been in the forefront of the fight for democracy in Myanmar since the military coup on 1 February.

Due to the impacts of the military coup in Myanmar, many university teachers who participated in the CDM have been removed from their position. They are in hiding and at risk. Some have been charged under criminal code 505(a) and detained. Besides personal insecurity, many are struggling to survive as they no longer get paid. Although they were facing various difficulties, they will continue participating in the CDM until the end and hope that the revolution shall win.

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Footnotes

[1] The author contacted fifteen familiar university teachers through Facebook Messenger and requested that they answer a questionnaire for this article. Out of fifteen requests, ten teachers completed the survey for a response rate of 66.6%.