

The Tragedy of Myanmar Higher Education Under the Coup

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On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military (*Tatmadaw*) conducted a coup timed so as to stop the newly elected parliamentarians from taking their seats. This article gives a brief overview of how this has affected higher education and its reform.

Myanmar Political Realities

Between 1962 and 2010, Myanmar was under military rule. A pathway to change opened around 2005, with a new military-drafted constitution in 2008 and elections in 2010. The first civilianized government under President Thein Sein started a comprehensive reform process with three priorities: national reconciliation with the National League for Democracy (NLD) led by *Daw Aung San Suu Kyi* (DASSK); ethnic peace with 20+ ethnic armed groups; and economic reforms. Education reforms were added shortly after. While democracy was not on offer, a new participatory system ensured that in 2015, the NLD won a majority of seats—as they did again in November 2020. The military constitution maintains control of three key ministries as well as 25 percent of all seats in all parliaments for the *Tatmadaw*. The coup surprised most, as it was widely believed that even in the midst of reforms, the *Tatmadaw* retained its key role at the heart of government.

Higher Education Reforms

The reforms started with a comprehensive education sector review in 2011–2012. The highly centralized higher education system, in which everything from academic appointments to curricular content was decided by the ministry of education (MoE), opened up gradually. This included memorandums of understanding with foreign universities for

Abstract

Myanmar's military coup has interrupted a decade of reforms, including important changes to higher education. Students and staff are at the forefront of anti-coup protests, bearing the brunt of the violence. This article gives a brief overview on how the higher education sector has been affected, arguing that the *Tatmadaw* (the Myanmar military) has no qualms about damaging higher education, seeing the revolt of students and staff as treason to the country.

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joint research and teaching, writing university charters for institutions that were to be granted gradual autonomy, engaging with ASEAN's qualifications framework, including a student exchange program, and setting up a rectors' committee. The new National Institute for Higher Education and Development had senior university staff trained by the University College London Institute of Education on issues ranging from how to connect assessment to new curricular development based on academic research, to setting up an ethics board. Undergraduates who had been kept away from Yangon's urban campuses after the student protests of the 1980s and 1990s were allowed to return.

Higher Education's Reaction to the Coup

Anti-coup protests started early in February 2021, led initially by doctors, nurses, and students from government hospitals, which also include Myanmar's medical schools. University staff and students soon followed. The protests coalesced around different groups, but the higher education sector is mainly involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), with staff walking off the job and institutions shutting. Some key CDM staff were punished by demotion or by being sent to more remote universities. The MoE issued a circular stating that promotions would be denied to those taking part in CDM. Staff were asked to state whether they supported the protests and to identify those who do. Because higher education staff are government employees, protesting academics were expelled from campus housing. In urban areas, the newly arrived *Tatmadaw* divisions that are usually stationed in ethnic conflict areas took over campuses as well as government hospitals to accommodate their soldiers. The government announced that postgraduate and final year undergraduate teaching was to resume in May, but given that most staff refuse to work and universities are now army barracks, it is unclear how this will work. Any other undergraduate teaching has been suspended, mirroring the 1980s and 1990s, when universities were closed for over a decade and a half and a whole generation of young people missed out on higher education.

Students have been at the forefront of the revolt—although across the country many other groups joined the demonstrations, including many government teachers who present themselves in their uniforms with the MoE's green flag. At first, protests were peaceful, resembling festivals with fancy dress and humorous posters, some of which insulting the *Tatmadaw*. Police reaction to increasing crowds escalated from water cannons to sound grenades and rubber bullets. With the arrival of light infantry divisions, the nature of protests changed, as soldiers fired live bullets on unarmed crowds and snipers shot individuals in the head. At the time of writing, a conservative estimate of the number of protesters killed exceeds 700. Volunteer medical teams are also targeted by soldiers when they try to help the wounded, and many doctors have gone into hiding. Most hospitals and their medical schools remain closed. Young people have continued to protest, building roadblocks with tyres, which are burned down by advancing troops as the conflict escalates.

The State Administration Council, governed by Chief of Staff General Min Aung Hlaing, has increased repression of both the CDM and protesters. This includes lists of wanted people (including academic staff and student leaders) read out on television every night at 8 pm, and nightly arrests. At the time of writing, there have been over 4,000 people arrested (with around 3,500 still in custody), including Australian academic Dr Sean Turnell, who was DASSK's economic advisor. There have been reports of torture, and families are sometimes called to retrieve the bodies of those taken away the previous night. In a number of cases, families were asked to pay for the bodies of their relatives. Student leaders are in hiding, and some young people have started to flee to border areas where they hope to receive combat training from ethnic armed organizations. But the *Tatmadaw* is escalating the conflict in ethnic areas as well, and has carried out the first aerial bombings in Karen and Kachin States in two decades. Mobile and wireless internet have been cut to make communication between protesters harder and all nongovernment media has been officially shut down, as journalists are risking their lives to report.

Education in Times of Coups

This is not the first time that the *Tatmadaw* has cracked down on protests. Similar repressions happened in 1962, 1988, 1990, and 2007. Students and the wider higher education sector have always greatly suffered, with years of closure and academic repression. In the eyes of the military, higher education is not a necessary element of wider reforms. In the view of the *Tatmadaw*, the education system should teach young people to respect the military and its position. Those who disrespect them are in revolt against the stalwarts of the nation. In spite of calls to end the violence by a recent ASEAN summit of leaders, no one can be sure of when or how the standoff will end. What is clear is that the higher education sector will again take a long time to recover. ▲

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