

Myanmar's protests have unified a disparate country, but including the Rohingya can help defeat the coup

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Posted Mon 15 Feb 2021, 2:06pm Updated Mon 22 Feb 2021, 5:31pm



The coup and its aftermath present real opportunities for the Rohingya and Myanmar's young people to forge common cause for the removal of the military from political influence in Myanmar permanently. (Stringer / Getty Images)

Saffron robed Buddhist monks, leather clad punks, shirtless muscle-bound hunks, taffeta ballgown wearing “princes protesters”, chefs in toques, black robed lawyers, construction workers in hard hats, nurses and doctors in scrubs, tattooed martial artists, nat spirit worshipers, civil servants, drag queens, trade unionists, farmers, teachers, taxi drivers, Christians, Hindus, Muslims, the old, the young, women, men, girls and boys — this week and last, these were just some of the groups who joined the biggest protests against military rule ever seen in Myanmar.

Protesters arrived on foot, in convoys of bicycles, motorcycles, horse pulled drays, cars, trucks, tractors, and boats. They represented every religion, ethnic, and age group, and they gathered in hundreds of villages, towns, and cities. One protest took place on the water using boats among the floating villages of Inle Lake, a popular tourist spot. Yangon's shops sold out of red balloons, the colour Aung San Suu Kyi's political party. The flags and traditional dress of Myanmar's ethnic minority communities were proudly displayed. Yangon's usually hidden Rohingya community even openly joined in, and Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh showed solidarity by holding candle-light vigils and sharing photos displaying the three fingered salute that has been adopted by the protesters.

Amid a sometimes carnivalesque atmosphere, protesters sang songs, gave speeches, recited poetry, painted banners, and posted on social media — the protests have an undoubtedly youthful edge. It would hardly have been possible to imagine, let alone bring together, a more diverse mix of Myanmar's fifty-five million people. But apparent within this extraordinary diversity, was unity behind a common goal: the restoration of Myanmar's democratically elected civilian government and the removal of the military from political power.

By undertaking a coup and arresting Myanmar's recently re-elected civilian political leaders, military boss Senior General Min Aung Hlaing precipitated nationwide social unrest. Day after day, protesters have ignored military instructions to disperse, and there is widespread and growing resistance to the new military junta with public servants and hospital staff downing their tools. Banks were reported closed because they lacked the staff to open. It seems every day more people join the resistance. Notably, this has included defections of police — usually under military control — to join the protests, labelling themselves “People's Police” and calling for the restoration of the democratically elected civilian government.

The threat of military violence

The military will not give up easily. Every protester, however enthusiastic, knows the threat of catastrophic violence constantly looms. To hold on to power, the military could unleash unspeakable violence against peaceful protesters at any moment. They have recent form for this. In 2017, the military subjected Myanmar's Rohingya community to indiscriminate murders, widespread sexual assaults, village burnings, and mass detention — more than 700,000 Rohingya fled to Bangladesh. Similar violence could easily be brought to bear on the protesters.

For the protesters, the casual brutality of Myanmar's military was highlighted during the first days of the coup when peaceful gatherings in the capital Nay Pyi Taw were met with water cannons and rubber bullets interspersed with live rounds, leading to the shooting of a 19-year-old woman in the head. Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, a grocery store worker who travelled from her village with her sisters, remains in a critical condition and is not expected to survive the shooting. She may not be the first protester murdered by Myanmar's military but in a country where social mores often lean to the traditional, the optics of shooting a young woman as she peacefully asked for the return of the democratically elected government has further undermined the military's standing.

Growing protests demonstrate the coup lacks public support and its military leaders lack legitimacy. While previous military coups have been unpopular, the military was often able to use “divide and rule” tactics to play groups off against each other and undermine coordinated resistance. However, this time the coup leaders have simultaneously unified virtually every key sector of the country against them.

Myanmar's generational change

Before the coup, Myanmar's demographics were already flowing strongly against continued military influence in government. While a defining feature of modern Myanmar politics has been the strong influence of the 1988 uprising that catapulted Aung San Suu Kyi and many other civilian government leaders — including ousted President Win Myint — to political prominence, more than seventy per cent of Myanmar's population was not born when that uprising occurred. Myanmar's young people have been kept away from power by the political endurance of those who first came to prominence in 1988 and have largely filled key leadership roles in Aung San Suu Kyi's administration, but as time passes that situation was always bound to change.

Myanmar's young people have grown up as Myanmar liberalised its previously highly restricted communications and media sectors, they have good links with and knowledge of the world beyond Myanmar and are accustomed to freely expressing their political opinions. The aspirations of Myanmar's youth often contrast wildly with those of their parents and grandparents, who grew up under military-rule when the country was a hermit state closed to outside media and hostile to foreign influences. Young protesters are making clear that they do not want to be ruled by old, male soldiers and indications are they will continue to resist until the military is overthrown.

Myanmar's street protests are also making clear many don't merely want a return to the pre-coup *status quo*, which included extensive military influence in government, no civilian oversight of the military, and a military veto on constitutional change — they want the military out of politics permanently. And quickly. Much more quickly than Aung San Suu Kyi's civilian administration, tarnished internationally by its failure to oppose genocide against the Rohingya, have pushed for during its time in power.

The importance of Rohingya solidarity

Young people will hope the tide of demographics helps lead to the washing away of martial rule, but to take on Myanmar's entrenched military, they will need all the allies they can find. This is a central point I make in my book *Myanmar's Rohingya Genocide*, where I call for Myanmar's young people and the Rohingya to embrace each other as natural allies. My hope is that as Myanmar's younger generation move closer to political power, a more humanitarian approach towards the Rohingya could be a consequence of a generational change in Myanmar politics, and I strongly encourage the Rohingya leadership to actively engage with young people to seek common ground.

Of course, it would be understandable if some Rohingya opted to sit out these protests, treating Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest as fair comeuppance for her endorsement of military actions against them, but the Rohingya's leadership understands that removing the military from political power in Myanmar must be a priority — the strong solidarity with protesters already shown by Rohingya groups is proof of this.

There have been powerful examples of Rohingya solidarity with the protests and a statement condemning the coup from the Rohingya Women's Network is a particularly significant endorsement, considering the specific targeting of Rohingya women and girls by Myanmar's military.



Ambia Perveen
@AmbiaPerveen



#Rohingya women stands being people of #Myanmar on the current situation. Our quote #Democracy, is not the law of majority but the protection of minorities!!!!!!"

Rohingya Women Globally Condemn the Military Coup in Myanmar

February 11, 2021

We, the Rohingya Women's Network, strongly condemn the military coup in Myanmar.

Our network represents Rohingya women from the global diaspora –in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Australia, and other countries – today we stand in solidarity with the people of Myanmar.

On February 1, Min Aung Hlaing led the military take over and detained political leaders as well as human rights defenders across the country. The coup is a fatal attack on democracy. Myanmar's people cannot continue to be betrayed again and again so that a small cadre of people can remain in power and rule with an iron fist. We, the Rohingya Women's Network, demand the immediate release of all people arrested by the military coup-makers.

The Rohingya people and other communities in Myanmar have suffered for decades under the military. In 2017, the Rohingya people bore the brunt of the mass killings, rape, and burning of entire villages by the Myanmar military.

We, the Rohingya Women's Network believe that the 2008 Constitution does not allow a proper democracy to function in Myanmar. Many people across the country protesting in the streets are calling for eliminating the 2008 Constitution and restoring democracy. We

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The Rohingya have been disappointed by Myanmar's civilian politicians, but they support Myanmar's moves towards democracy — and they especially support calls for the rejection of the compromised 2008 Constitution that allows the military to avoid civilian government oversight. The coup and its aftermath present real opportunities for the Rohingya and Myanmar's young people to forge common cause for the removal of the military from political influence in Myanmar permanently and reforming the constitutional framework so they can never return to power.

Myanmar's Rohingya reckoning

There are strong indications this important political realignment was already under way in Myanmar before the coup, with some youth activists concerned about the growth of racism in politics having taken action to curb it. Young inter-faith activists and groups like Generation Wave have been vocal supporters of human rights for all in Myanmar, including the Rohingya, and were strongly critical of ongoing military influence on politics.

Young political activists, especially those from ethnic minority groups, had been growing increasingly frustrated with restrictions on freedom of expression and with public expressions of racism. The #BlackLivesMatter-inspired “Don't call me Kalar” social media campaign is an excellent example of this. “Kalar” is a pejorative often applied by racists to Rohingya and others with darker skin, but young people embraced with gusto an online campaign to end the practice, demonstrating similar cleverness, wit, and political edginess as we have seen in many anti-coup protests.

Public silence during the 2017 Rohingya crisis has increasingly been a subject of concern for anti-coup protesters, many of whom are fast coming to terms with the inconsistency of their silence when the military brutalised the Rohingya while they themselves now call for international help to remove that same military from power. It is better this realisation comes late than not at all. The sight of democracy protesters in downtown Yangon carrying signs reading, “I really regret about Rohingya crisis”, are an indication a rethink about the reaction towards the Rohingya's most recent crisis in 2017 is underway for some.



Poppy McPherson ✓

@poppymcp



Strong image from downtown Yangon. This seems like a moment of reckoning for some in [#Myanmar](#) over the appalling treatment of the Rohingya.

[#WhatIsHappeningInMyanmar](#)



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One of many recent tweets I have received points to this reckoning, and highlights the legacy of decades of state media demonisation of the Rohingya, who were commonly portrayed as sinister foreign interlopers rather than a group indigenous to Myanmar:



Dr Ronan Lee 🍀 🐶 · Feb 13, 2021

"I really regret about Rohingya crisis"

Democracy protesters in Yangon
awaking to the reality that like them, the
Rohingya are victims of a brutal
Myanmar military.

[#Myanmarcoup](#)

[#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar](#)

[#Rohingya](#)



Poppy McPherson @popp...

Strong image from downtown
Yangon. This seems like a moment
of reckoning for some in #Myanmar
over the appalling treatment of the
Rohingya.

[#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar](#)



San Myat Win

@SanMyatWin

Most of us didn't even know about
Rohingya Genocide. The military
blackout about that kind of things.
They do whatever they want. Now
including me and all of us are in full
of regret for ignoring them. You all
need to know is that DASSk doesn't
have power to commend military.

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Many in Myanmar have been unaware the Rohingya were uncontroversially recognised as citizens during the civilian government era that followed independence between 1948 and 1962, but had their rights restricted and their citizenship rights disputed once the military seized power in the 1962 coup that presaged five decades of military rule. The Rohingya know better than most the value of a democracy and the perils of military rule. Considering the international support they can harness, the Rohingya should now be a key ally of democracy protesters in the campaign to oust the military. The most effective way for the Rohingya and others in Myanmar to fight the military is by cooperating.

Myanmar's coup is a step too far for most and defeating it is an opportunity for the country to at last change its constitution in order to kick the military from politics. This presents Myanmar with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine the country's future. The shared experience of military oppression of the Rohingya and Myanmar's majority, made tangible by the coup and its aftermath, opens up a path forward — one that realises the future imagined when the country emerged from colonial rule in 1948, a time when the Rohingya played a full role in politics and were regarded as a legitimate part of the national fabric.

But achieving this future means the military's coup first needs to be defeated — and in the short term, that's far from a sure bet.

Ronan Lee is Visiting Scholar at the International State Crime Initiative in the School of Law, Queen Mary University of London. He was formerly a Queensland State Member of Parliament (2001–2009) and served on the frontbench as a Parliamentary Secretary (2006–2008) in portfolios including Justice, Main Roads and Local Government, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Partnerships. He is the author of Myanmar's Rohingya Genocide: Identity, History and Hate Speech.