

# Protesters and Bystanders: Ethnic Minorities in the Pro-Democracy Revolution

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***Jangai Jap** reflects on ethnic minorities' participation in Myanmar's pro-democracy revolution.*

The day after the coup on February 1, 2021, civil servants across Myanmar launched a national Civil Disobedience Movement, consisting of multi-sector labor strikes targeting the Myanmar state's apparatuses. By February 4, the first visible anti-coup protest in the country appeared in Mandalay, the second largest city in the country. The first visible protest in Yangon occurred on February 5. By February 11, protests and rallies started appearing in ethnic minority areas and the country's peripheries in full force. On February 22, millions of Myanmar people joined a [nationwide general strike](#) against the coup regime in what is considered to be the largest single-day pro-democracy demonstration in the country's history.

While the protest movements are widespread in many ethnic minority areas, ethnic minority communities disagree over how to respond to the coup. One side prefers to be quiescent and neutral bystanders; the other, particularly younger generations, insists on active resistance.

In this essay, I describe and reflect on ethnic minorities' reactions to the coup, focusing on an emerging class cleavage in Kachin State, where I conducted research between 2017 and 2019. I have also communicated with several Kachin local residents and protesters in an informal capacity in the past weeks. It is important to note that my observations of an emerging class cleavage in Kachin communities is part of a broader trend across Myanmar. While the coup precipitated from a power struggle between the military and the National League for Democracy (NLD), ultimately, I argue that the on-going pro-democracy revolution in Myanmar is a (class) struggle, between ordinary Myanmar people and complacent elites, a struggle which cuts across entrenched ethnic, religious and political divides in the country.

## To Protest or Not to Protest?

In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Myanmar's ethnic minorities encountered a dilemma— whether or not to participate in the anti-coup protests that were spreading across the country. At the time, young ethnic minorities in Yangon and Mandalay were

already participating in and organizing protests. However, in the ethnic minority states, ethnic minority politicians and businessmen and their associates urged caution. They argued that the coup is primarily a Bamar power struggle between the military and the NLD— something in which ethnic minorities do not need to get involved.

Many among the younger generations of ethnic minorities perceive the coup as a blatant assault on the country's transition toward democracy and see the on-going crisis as an opportunity [to remake Myanmar politics](#). They thus strongly disagree with elites' calls to remain bystanders in this crisis. Social media posts by ethnic minority participants in the demonstrations indicate that many youth see only two abysmal outcomes if they remain quiescent: either (1) the coup-makers win, and Myanmar descends into another period of dictatorship or (2) the coup-makers retreat, and Myanmar goes back to the status quo—a political system that was hardly inclusive of ethnic minorities. So, they not only speak up against the coup but also advocate that the mainstream pro-democracy movement, including the [Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw \(CRPH\)](#), recognize the interests of ethnic minorities. They [collectively advocate](#) for (1) ending dictatorship, (2) abolishing the 2008 constitution, (3) establishing a federal democracy and (4) unconditional release of those unjustly detained.<sup>[1]</sup> Their advocacy is broadly shaping the rhetoric of the mainstream pro-democracy movement in Myanmar. By early March, the Bamar public and [the CRPH endorsed these demands](#).

## Co-optation of Ethnic Minorities

Ethnic minorities' reactions to the coup are further complicated by the coup regime's attempt to co-opt ethnic minorities, a persistent feature of authoritarian rule in Myanmar.

Following the military coup in 1962, Myanmar was ruled by a repressive single-party socialist regime: the Burma Socialist Programme Party, or BSPP. The BSPP laid the foundation for exclusionary policies toward some ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, while favoring the ethnic minorities it considered to be *taingyintha*.<sup>[2]</sup> During this period (1962–1988), co-optation primarily took the form of inclusion of *taingyintha* in the party structure and in local and regional governments. In ethnic minority areas, the local government and party officials were predominantly ethnic minorities. My interviews with Kachin BSPP officials indicate that such co-optation induced a feeling of “self-rule” among ethnic minorities. A few *taingyintha*, such as Sein Lwin (ethnic Mon and the last president of the socialist regime), even rose to become [high-ranking officials in the regime](#).

In the post-BSPP era, which was ruled by the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC, 1988-2010), co-optation took the form of lucrative business deals and licenses given to ethnic armed organizations and local businessmen, both Bamar and ethnic minorities. The SPDC era arguably originated crony capitalism in Myanmar. As Thant Myint-U notes in his [recent book](#), before the SPDC era “nearly everyone was poor

together” because of the Burmese Way to Socialism. The majority of economic elites in contemporary Myanmar amassed their enormous wealth through affiliations with the generals.

The leaders of the present coup abolished the elected government and installed their own State Administrative Councils at the national and regional levels. Some individuals from Arakan, Chin, Kachin, Karen and Mon ethnic communities have [accepted positions](#) in the coup regime, though many have [declined offers](#) to serve the coup.

My conversations within the Kachin community suggest that fear of out-group rule motivated Hkyet Hting Nan, a Kachin businessman to accept the chairman position of Kachin State Administrative Council in the coup regime. A group of Kachin businessmen apparently encouraged him to accept the position as well. When he was summoned by the military and offered the position, he was reportedly told that if he declined the position it would go to a Shan. The Shan are the second largest ethnic minority group in Kachin State, accounting for nearly a quarter of the state’s population, and there is a history of conflict between Kachin and Shan communities. Indeed, when a Kachin lawyer and politician declined the position of Kachin State Attorney General in the coup regime in early March, [a Shan lawyer was appointed](#) in her place.

Many ethnic minorities denounce their co-ethnics who collaborate with the coup-makers. Coup collaborators are publicly shamed, and communities have called for unprecedented [social punishment](#) against them. Social punishment campaigns also target family members of coup collaborators and of high-ranking military personnel who do not condemn the coup.<sup>[3]</sup> This resistance strategy typically consists of [social ostracization and business boycotts](#).

In contrast, some ethnic minorities try to remain neutral bystanders. They see merit in collaborating with whoever is in power. They argue that it is better if one of our own is in the position of power than an out-group member, because a co-ethnic would protect and favor their ethnic group, which would make life under dictatorship bearable.

## The NLD’s Legacy in Ethnic Minority Communities

Why do ethnic minorities and ethnic minority political parties disagree over how to respond to the coup? While many factors matter, part of the answer may lie in the NLD’s lackluster legacy in ethnic minority communities. During its five years in office, the NLD-led government not only failed to protect ethnic minorities from atrocities committed by the military but also showed very little interest in accommodating ethnic minorities politically or symbolically, apart from a small, select group of co-opted elites. Furthermore, the civil war also intensified in ethnic minority areas when the NLD was in power. While acknowledging that the military is not under control of the civilian government, ethnic minorities were deeply disappointed and felt betrayed. Since the NLD

did not stand up for them, why should ethnic minorities stand up for the NLD during the coup? This feeling is no doubt pervasive across all ethnic minority communities.

However, while many bystanders are NLD nay-sayers, it would be a mistake to conclude that ethnic minorities who have taken a strong stance against the coup support the NLD. Young ethnic minorities were appalled when [Aung San Suu Kyi \(ASSK\) defended](#) the military at the International Court of Justice for charges of genocide committed against the Rohingya people. They know that the last five years under the NLD leadership was like “[living under another form of dictatorship](#).” They disapprove of the NLD leadership just as strongly as those who urge neutrality between the coup and the NLD.

At the same time, they are actively involved in the pro-democracy revolution because they recognize that democracy in Myanmar can and must be larger than ASSK and the NLD. In essence, they are challenging the ASSK- and NLD-centric notions of democracy that have been pervasive in Myanmar for the last twenty years. Thus, although the NLD government exacerbated distrust of its leadership in ethnic minority communities, not all ethnic minority critics of NLD have chosen to be bystanders.

## The Emerging Cleavage: Elites and Ordinary Citizens

The divide between ethnic minority bystanders and protesters seems to map onto a class cleavage between elites and ordinary citizens. The elites are established economic and social elites; these two groups tend to encompass more or less the same sets of families. The economic elites from ethnic minority communities may not be as wealthy as those from the mainstream community, but they are nevertheless the wealthiest families in their communities. As alluded to earlier, the majority of economic elites are close associates of the generals. Thus, they have something to lose by publicly speaking out against the military or collaborators. It is no wonder that the elites (and those in their circle) tend to be “neutral” bystanders at best and collaborators with the coup-makers at worst. In contrast, ordinary citizens, including members of the professional class and a large swath of civil servants, are out in the street protesting the coup-regime and calling for social sanctions against those working with it.

Some of the most influential works in political science argue that democracy results from, in the words of Welzel and Ingelhart, “a struggle between [propertied elites and impoverished masses](#).”<sup>[4]</sup> In Myanmar, ordinary citizens are willing to risk their livelihoods and their lives to protest dictatorship because they know that they can only have a promising future in a democracy. They stand to lose everything if dictatorship prevails. In contrast, the elites have prospered under dictatorship while democracy presents them with an uncertain future.

This class cleavage has been particularly visible in the Kachin community. The newly appointed chairman of the Kachin State Administrative Council is described locally as a

“Kachin crony” and Kachin analysts predict he will use his position “to further enrich himself and his business associates.” The Kachin public has pleaded with him to step down from his position in the coup regime. Doing so would cost him not only his future business opportunities but also his current undertakings. It is apparent that the decision to say no to the military and cut ties with it is cumbersome only for those with something to lose.

Even as much of the Kachin public turns against the council chairman, my communications with local residents indicate that several Kachins have requested an audience with and paid respect to him. There is no doubt that they hope to obtain lucrative licenses, landholdings and business opportunities from the council chairman. And there is also no doubt that he will engage in ethnic favoritism and assent to his co-ethnics’ requests, resulting in ethnic-based clientelist networks that implicitly bolster the military’s clench on Myanmar politics. While some Kachins argue that resulting business undertakings promote Kachin national interests, most ordinary Kachins strongly condemn such business networks as self-seeking and opportunistic.

This phenomenon—wherein ordinary citizens are fighting for democracy at all cost, while members of the business-owning class and elites stand by, waiting to align themselves with an eventual victor—extends beyond the ethnic minority communities. Myanmar’s wealthiest business tycoons and their family members have largely kept a low profile since the coup. They have neither publicly condoned nor condemned the coup. In the on-going political crisis, these elites lend at least some implicit support to the coup regime under the guise of neutrality, complicating Myanmar’s path toward democracy.

Power can only be defined in terms of how people relate to one another. It materializes into reality only with the consent from those ruled. In the long run, power cannot stand on its own. The Myanmar coup-makers’ power will crumble if the ruled dissent and resist it. Ordinary people of Myanmar are united in their resolve to fight against the coup regime. It appears that the elites’ complacency and complicity are the main barriers that remain between dismantling the generals’ power.

## The Revolution Heralds New, Cross-cutting Solidarity

When democracy prevails in Myanmar, it will have been because of the sacrifices of Myanmar’s ordinary citizens. 44 days since the coup, over 2000 Myanmar people have been arrested, hundreds injured and 200 murdered by the coup-makers. These fallen lives include Bamar, Chinese, Muslim and *taingyintha* who are collectively mourned by Myanmar people across ethnic and religious cleavages. March 3 and 14 were the bloodiest days since the day when the coup was staged. Nonetheless, ordinary citizens defiantly vow more protests. However, Myanmar’s elites have thus far stood by, with a

few offering empty words of condolences and prayers for peace, as the country turns into a bloody battleground.

For most of Myanmar history, ethnic identities have been a foremost rallying point, and a key determinant of individuals' social and political outlook. Ordinary ethnic minorities stood in rank behind their elites and political leaders, assuming that their fate and welfare were linked to that of their co-ethnics. This in-group ethnic solidarity was further exacerbated by discrimination and exclusionary practices of the state and its officials.

However, in the aftermath of the coup, new forms of solidarity have emerged across entrenched ethnic divisions. Ordinary people of Myanmar are joining hands to defend their interests against the generals and their associates. These new forms of solidarity have spurred the ordinary people to realize the enormous social power they wield. This realization will only persist through post-crisis Myanmar and shape the country's politics for years to come.

The emergence of cross-cutting solidarity does not mean that ethnic identities are no longer relevant in Myanmar politics. Rather, it underscores the multifaceted nature of people's social and political identities. Political behaviors of an ethnic minority person are not determined by their minority experiences only but rather by myriad of identities they hold. Ethnic identity might be the dominant factor for politics in some circumstances, but class or another identity might matter more at other times.

In the on-going crisis, peoples' identity as elites or ordinary citizens, rather than their ethnic identity, is the primary determinant of their reactions to the coup. Ordinary citizens are doing everything they can to fracture the generals' grip on their country. I am hopeful that the emerging cross-cutting solidarity will serve as the foundation for a new Myanmar—a Myanmar that is more inclusive and more equal than it has ever been.

(Featured Image courtesy of [The Irrawaddy](#))

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[1] These principles first appeared in slogans held by ethnic minority youth protesters in Yangon as early as February 6. These youths formally established the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN) in the second week of February. The CRPH formally affirmed these political goals on March 5, 2021.

[2] The Myanmar government officially recognizes 135 *thaingyintha* or “national races” (136 since the Thein Sein administration added one more group). The 1982 citizenship law defines *taingyintha* as “a [cultural group](#) present in what is now known as Myanmar before the first British annexation of Burma began in 1823.” Only members of *taingyintha* can be “full” citizens.

[3] A few family members of military personnel and collaborators have denounced the coup and engage in social punishment against their family members who continue to work for or associate with the coup regime.

[4] See *Democracy and Redistribution* by Carles Boix and *Economic Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* by Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson.