

Is Myanmar's Spring Revolution Winnable?': The Role of CRPH and the EAOs in the Revolution

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Zung Ring (*pseudonym*) argues that the revolution's outcome depends on bold decisions and effective leadership.

On 8 November 2020, Myanmar had its third general election since 2010. The electorate overwhelmingly voted for the National League for Democracy (NLD). On 1 February 2021, the Tatmadaw staged a coup, alleging that the NLD had taken power by fraudulent means. President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, along with most senior NLD leaders, were immediately arrested. The remaining senior NLD leaders urged people to protest, before being arrested themselves. The people have risen to the occasion, and have sacrificed much to challenge the coup. The fate of the revolution lies in the hands of political entities and ethnic armed organizations, who must support the people before it is too late.

People's Response to the Military Coup

Under the banner of the —Spring Revolution”, Myanmar's anti-military coup movement has generated an unprecedented level of national unity – overcoming ethnic, religious, and class boundaries. Since early February, protesters have drummed pots and pans every day at 8pm in response to the coup. They have come out to streets, turning major roads into seas of people, remaining peaceful despite the violence they endure at the hands of the military. Civil servants and private sector workers have established a national civil disobedience movement (CDM) in an unmatched attempt to cripple the military's administrative mechanism.



As security forces came to arrest the protesters, drivers blocked the bridge and the police turned back. (Photo by Zung Ring)

In response to brutal crackdowns from security forces, demonstrations are now smaller to aid escape. The protesters have also used road blockages to hinder the advancement of security forces. However, security forces have now forcefully cleared blockades at most protest sites. In some places, security forces have reportedly forced local residents (especially men) to clear them.

Protesters have also started [social punishment](#) campaigns against military families and their associates, and have called for a boycott of products produced by military's companies. These tactics have already had significant effects. For instance, many restaurants and bars no longer sell Myanmar Beer. There are also reports of people boycotting MyTel, a mobile operator jointly owned by the [Tatmadaw and the Vietnamese military](#).

One could argue that the public has done their part to the best of their capacities and it would be unrealistic to expect more from them. The best they could possibly do would be to continue the social punishment campaign against military leaders, their families and associates, as well as to sustain their boycott of products and services provided by the military's companies.

Therefore, at this point, the outcome of the Myanmar Spring Revolution largely depends on the capacity of institutional leaders to consolidate various opposition forces. The elected members of the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (Union Parliament), mostly from the NLD, are attempting to provide the institutional leadership

by forming the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). Thus, the outcome of the Myanmar Spring Revolution depends on the political decisions and leadership of the CRPH.

The Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)

The elected NLD members believe that their victory in the 2020 general election provides a mandate to form the CRPH, which was established so that they could perform the necessary activities and duties of an elected government. These include appointing and forming a government and making laws.

Political Visions of the CRPH

On 5 March 2021, the CRPH announced its political vision, declaring their commitment to the following: to end military dictatorship; to ensure the unconditional release of all unlawful detainees including President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi; to achieve full-fledged democracy; and to rescind the 2008 Constitution and write a new Constitution based on the federal system.

The CRPH also states that it will steadfastly work hand-in-hand with all ethnic nationalities and strive for the full realization of this vision. To pave the way for broader participation in the Spring Revolution, the CRPH removed all the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) from the unlawful organization list while designating the Tatmadaw as a terrorist organization.

It seems that most of the ethnic minorities welcome the political visions of the CRPH. However, many ethnic minorities also feel that the CRPH's vision statement is only the first step. The CRPH must further show a concrete roadmap for including diverse voices within their vision. For example, the former joint secretary of the Karen National Union (KNU), Padoh Mahn Mahn, states that the political visions of the CRPH are only the beginning and that the CRPH must provide a workable plan for establishing a genuine federal union and a federal army. Likewise, the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy also points out that CRPH must declare the abolishment of the 2008 Constitution if ethnic minorities are to come onboard.

At that point, the status of the 2008 Constitution was unclear because its abolishment was only positioned as a political vision. However, on 31 March 2021, the CRPH has declared abolishment of the 2008 Constitution and announced Federal Democracy Charter. The Charter provides further details on how the CRPH might seek to translate its visions into reality, for instance by declaring the duties of an interim National Unity Government (NUG). The list of individuals appointed to the NUG was released on 16 April 2021.

Progress of the political talks between the CRPH and the EAOs

The stated political visions of CRPH appear to have won the hearts and minds of some ethnic minority political parties and armed organizations. Since its formation, the CRPH has reportedly been negotiating with EAOs on the terms of creating a federal union. Among those involved in the talks are the Karen National Union, the Restoration Council for Shan State, and the Kachin Independence Army, as well as other groups that have signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement. By March 2021, the political talks are about 80% complete, according to Zin Mar Aung, the Acting Foreign Minister of the CRPH. These political talks contributed to the aforementioned Federal Democracy Charter and the appointment of the NUG.

According to the Charter, the interim NUG is formed with these roles: President, State Counsellor, Vice President 1, Vice President 2, ministers and deputy ministers. The NUG appointed by the CRPH shows that President U Win Myint and State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi remain in their posts despite being in detention. The NUG is perhaps the most diverse government in terms of ethnicities the country has ever had.

As an aside, it is interesting to ask why the CRPH decided to keep Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as State Counsellor instead of appointing her as the President. Some might beg an answer for the rationale of keeping the post of —State Counsellor”. The post was created to circumvent the 2008 Constitution, which bars people married to foreigners from becoming the president. One wonders why the CRPH has decided to retain the —State Counsellor” post even after declaring the abolishment of the 2008 Constitution.

Doubts over the CRPH

Ethnic minorities have two major concerns over the capacity of the CRPH to uphold the agreements and understandings that the CRPH has reached with them. The first concern relates to ethnic minorities’ perception that Bama political leaders and the majority of Bama ethnic people do not have a strong political will for federalism. This is because a delegation of power to State governments (i.e., ethnic minorities) would mean less power to the Union (Central) Government (i.e., Bama). In other words, federalism is not the top priority of the NLD and (most) Bama ethnic people.

Federalism has never been the top [priority of the NLD\[1\]](#) and the Tatmadaw. In the last [Union Peace Conference](#) in August 2020, they (Bama leaders) did not even agree over the terminology of —State Law” (insisted on by Bama leaders) and —State Constitution” (insisted on by NCA-signatories). Subsequently no agreement has been reached on how write a constitution or a mother law governing the ethnic states.

This time, the CRPH announced its political visions and the Federal Democracy Charter while some members of the NLD’s 21-member Central Executive Committee were still in detention. Thus, the concern is whether the CRPH will be able to convince freed NLD leaders to support and honor the agreement (i.e., political roadmap) reached with the ethnic minorities.

Another concern is whether the CRPH can convince the Bama public that federalism is the best way to address the long-standing civil war. From the start of public protests, the priorities of Bama ethnic group and non-Bama ethnic groups have been quite different. For example, the key demands of Bama protesters, who rally behind the NLD flag, have been: (1) the release of mother Suu (State Counsellor), President Win Myint and all other detainees; (2) respect the 2020 election result; (3) restoration of democracy and eradication of military dictatorship.

On the other hand, the key demands of ethnic minorities and (some groups of) Generation Z have been: (1) the eradication of the military dictatorship; (2) abolishment of the 2008 Constitution; (3) establishment of genuine federal democratic union; and (4) release of all detainees including the President and State Counsellor.

It took the CRPH a whole month to announce its ‘political visions’ statement above. It is understandable that the CRPH has hesitated to make the political decisions in the absence of all members of the NLD’s 21-member Central Executive Committee. The decision-makers of the CRPH must have worried about whether freed NLD leaders would support any political understanding or agreement reached between the CRPH and the EAOs. This author has learned that the ethnic minorities who chose to cooperate with the CRPH have the same concern.

Padoh Mahn Mahn of KNU states that if the NLD or CRPH were to betray the ethnic minorities when they regain power, that would be the end of the ethnic minorities' aspirations to remain in the union. This would force the minorities to choose a different political path. In his interview with Voice of Myanmar, KPICT spokesperson Nsang Gum San also echoes that for the Kachin, this could be seen as the final attempt to establish a federal union, which ethnic minorities have demanded for many decades.

However, Arakan National Party (ANP) and Mon Unity Party (MUP)—two opposition political parties seeking to represent the respective ethnic groups—have decided to join the military regime's State Administrative Council (SAC). This is clearly not helpful for the anti-coup movement as the military could argue that not all ethnic minorities are against the military's takeover.

Defeating the Coup Requires Faster Decision Making

The CRPH's announcement on 31 March 2021 – which declared the abolishment of the 2008 Constitution and announced the Federal Democracy Charter – was certainly a huge milestone for achieving federalism in Myanmar. Ethnic minorities had been urging the CRPH to show a clear and concrete roadmap. In his interview with Irrawaddy, CRPH spokesperson said that the Charter was consulted and agreed on by at least four political organizations, although he could not name them for security reasons. It remains to be seen if the Charter is able to rally all major ethnic armed organizations.

However, since the Charter is only a general roadmap, there might be issues that require mutually understanding clarification or definition. Both sides – that is, the CRPH and EAO leaders – have to work out such issues and cooperate quickly to resolve them. Time is of the essence.

Without full cooperation from at least the major EAOs, the Spring Revolution will seem unwinnable to the public and international community. Needless to say, it is of the utmost importance that people do not lose faith in the revolution. Currently, the international community is on the side of the CRPH as they condemn the coup d'état and violent crackdowns on the unarmed and peaceful protesters. No government — not even China and ASEAN members — has publicly recognized the military junta. However, this could change if the international community begins to think that Myanmar Spring Revolution is unlikely to succeed. Therefore, having a concrete agreement between the CRPH and EAOs is key.

(All images courtesy of Zung Ring)

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