

Inscribing Myanmar's *[nga]do ayei* revolution

From chant to compact

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Companion document:

[Writing Horizontal Compacts:](#)

[A Practical Guide for Drafters of Sagyok in Burmese, English, and Other Languages.](#)

Abstract

Myanmar's rallying cry *do ayei* ('our cause') encodes a structural duality that this article takes as its organising problem: *ayei* means both 'cause' and 'inscription.' Since 1988, the cause has been claimed repeatedly; the inscription has not followed. No binding compact co-signed across ethnic lines has emerged from three decades of resistance. The military understood this gap before the resistance did, capturing *do ayei* as constitutional obligation within two years of the 1988 uprising.

This article asks why Burmese resists horizontal political inscription and what building it would require. Drawing on linguistic analysis of pronouns, verbs, and documentary genres; a border workshop in which resistance participants attempted to compose horizontal compact sentences in Burmese; bilingual scoring of twelve constitutional texts spanning 1878 to 2026; and comparative analysis of mid-conflict declarations from the Atlantic Charter to the Federal Democracy Charter, it identifies six reinforcing impediments, each expressing a single structural condition in which Burmese political culture defaults to the individual as the unit of revolutionary agency: sacral confinement of the political domain, a grammatical default to hierarchy, soteriological orientation inward, the absence of any sacralizing mechanism for horizontal obligation, systematic co-option of resistance vocabulary, and a documentary asymmetry that confines compact-making expertise to the ethnic periphery. Every document in the corpus scores higher in horizontal commitment in English than in Burmese; the gap measures a structural condition, not a translation problem.

The article concludes that the drafter's task is assembly, not recovery: no single Burmese political term survives stress-testing as genuinely horizontal, but compromised components can be combined so that the cracks do not align. The ethnic nationality organizations who have maintained continuous compact-making traditions since 1947 hold the engineering knowledge the Bamar centre lacks. The Burmese case exposes a precondition Derrida's (1986) paradox of self-constitution left unexamined: that the language of a founding declaration can carry a horizontal collective pronoun. When it cannot, the declaration constitutes not citizens but subjects, and the founding paradox shifts from political (who authorized the signer?) to material (what did the declaration

actually bring into being?). The compact must accomplish what grammar, soteriology, and revolutionary tradition have not: the constitution of a collective political subject.

[ငါ]ဒို့အရေး — [nga] *do ayei*. 'Our cause' and 'Our inscription'

'This people does not exist. They do not exist as an entity, it does not exist, before this declaration, not as such.' — Jacques Derrida, 'Declarations of Independence' (1986)

'There is a class of illocutionary acts which bring about the state of affairs they represent. I call these declarations.' — John Searle, *Expression and Meaning* (1979: 16)

Do ayei (ဒို့အရေး) is the most recognisable and the most misunderstood feature of Myanmar's revolution. Since 1988, the chant has filled streets from Rangoon to Mandalay, been carried into exile, and returned after the 2021 coup with the same compressed force it carried the first time. It is read as a political slogan: 'our cause,' a cry for freedom, a demand addressed to those in power. This reading captures half the word. *Ayei* (အရေး) denotes both 'cause, crisis, affair' and, through identical spelling and pronunciation, 'line, writing, inscription.' The chant does not only name a cause; it names what the cause requires. *Do ayei* is already a demand for documentation. The word knows what the movement needs before the movement does.

The document has not followed. Since 1988, every surge of *do ayei* energy has generated individual acts of witness — speeches, manifestos, open letters, strike committee declarations — but no binding compact co-signed across ethnic lines, enforceable by parties who did not issue it. The military understood this before the resistance did: within two years of 1988, the junta had captured *do ayei* as 'our three main national causes,' rewriting the people's chant as constitutional obligation. The 2021 *do ayei* revolution faces the same structural problem its predecessor failed to resolve. This article traces why the gap between chant and compact persists, and what closing it would require.

The documentary forms through which this gap might be closed — *sadan* (authoritative record) and *sagyok* (binding compact) — are defined in the section below. What matters here is not the terminology but the structural distance between the two forms: one derives authority from method and expertise, the other from horizontal consent among co-equal parties.

The form is not the monopoly of rulers. Any citizen or community wishing to document their principles can produce a *sadan*. When a strike committee, a village council, or ordinary citizens document the principles by which they already live, they perform the same act as classical *sadan*: binding truth to text through method rather than command. The documentary tradition ran in one direction: extraction upward to the centre. The

revolutionary potential of contemporary *sadan* lies in reversing it — the periphery writing back, communities documenting their own principles rather than being catalogued for extraction. Where the pre-colonial *sittan* asked ‘What do you owe the King?’, the *sadan* declares ‘What do we owe each other?’ The radicalism of the current moment lies in the seizure of this genre by strike committees, unions, and youth groups: transforming a tool of elite intellectual stewardship into a mechanism of popular sovereignty.¹

Such grassroots documentary actors face a recurring historical problem. Arendt (1963: 262–63) traced how councils have emerged spontaneously in revolutionary moments, from the Parisian sections of 1789 to the Hungarian Räte of 1956, only to be crushed by centralizing forces. She called this the ‘lost treasure’ of the revolutionary tradition: spaces of genuine political freedom that no subsequent regime chose to preserve. Myanmar’s strike committees, township resistance networks, and ethnic governance structures represent a comparable emergence — and face the same danger. Documentation cannot guarantee survival, but without it the councils leave no trace from which successors can learn, and the chant remains a demand that awaits its capture.

This article proceeds through four stages. The first traces the vocabulary Myanmar’s resistance has produced for upheaval — *nga, do, ayei* — the military’s co-option of that vocabulary after 1988, and the ethnographic evidence of what happens when communities attempt to write horizontal political speech. The second, which forms the article’s centre, maps the grammatical architecture that pulls every Burmese political document toward the vertical, and scores selected texts spanning 1878 to 2026 across eight dimensions in both Burmese and English. The third draws on comparative experience of mid-conflict declarations — why some cascade into constitutional orders and others dissolve — and tests those findings against the theoretical objections and contemporary risks that any compact-making project in Myanmar must answer. The fourth derives the design requirements for building binding commitment into a text whose grammar resists it; the detailed drafting decisions are developed in the companion guide, *Writing Horizontal Compacts*.

Sadan and sagyok

A *sadan* (စာတမ်း) is a formal non-fiction text: a treatise, monograph, chronicle, or declaration that claims authority through method and expertise rather than sovereign command. It is not casual correspondence, private notation, or raw data extraction. It asserts a record worth preserving.²

¹ This article uses ‘do ayei revolution’ rather than the more common ‘Spring Revolution.’ The Burmese term *Nway U Tawhlanye* (နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး) literally means ‘Early Hot Season Revolution,’ referring to when the 2021 coup occurred. English-language media rendered this as ‘Spring Revolution,’ mapping Myanmar’s seasonal calendar onto the European metaphor popularized by the ‘Arab Spring.’ The mistranslation imports precisely the alien framework this article argues against.

² The Burmese word *sa* (စာ) means writing and inscription; *tan* (တမ်း) carries the archaic verbal sense ‘put on record’ and the nominal meanings ‘tradition; norm; standard.’ The Myanmar Language Commission defines *sadan* as ‘record of ancient traditions and customs’ and ‘treatise; monograph.’

The *sadan* this article aims to understand — strike committee declarations, federal proposals, resistance compacts — are a specific subset of the genre: they document collective agreements, what communities have decided together, and carry authority not from expertise or office but from the act of mutual promising they record.³

When communities bind themselves through *sagyok* (စာချုပ်), literally ‘obligatory writing: a contract, a bond, or agreement in writing,’ the resulting document becomes what the MLC terms *sagyok sadan* (စာချုပ်စာတမ်း): ‘a deed of agreement.’ A third form, *kyei nya gyet* (ကြေညာချက်) is sovereign proclamation from a centre: authority asserted by command rather than earned by consent or expertise.⁴

The terminology here derives from Bama-Buddhist scholastic traditions, but parallel concepts exist across Myanmar’s ethnic communities. Among the Chin and Kachin, Protestant missionary education fostered a distinct ‘covenant’ tradition that shaped ethnic embrace of Panglong as *sagyok* rather than mere political expedient (Sakhong 2003: 142–168). This article draws on Burmese language terms not to assert cultural dominance but because the resistance’s shared language of coordination has, for practical reasons, largely operated in Burmese.

The vocabulary of upheaval – *nga, do, ayei*

[*Nga*] *do ayei* (နို့အရေး) compresses three distinct linguistic events into two syllables: an absence, a collective claim, and a duality. The absent element is *nga* (ငါ), the transgressive first-person pronoun present in the Dobama formulation *nga-do*, which the chant has contracted out without eliminating — marked here by the square bracket [*nga*] that the article carries throughout. The collective claim is *do*, the residue of that contraction, performing horizontal solidarity while concealing the radicalism of its origins. The duality is *aye*, examined in detail below. What the sections that follow trace is why each element carries a structural burden, and why the inscription that *aye* names has not yet followed the cause it asserts.

The suppression is inscribed in the first element: *nga* (ငါ) is the ‘primitive’ first-person pronoun in Burmese: the self stripped of social deference, used by superiors speaking downward or between intimates who have suspended rank. To use *nga* when addressing a superior is transgressive; it denies their status. The alternative is *kya-naw* (ကျွန်တော်), literally ‘royal slave,’ from *kyun* (slave/bondsman) plus *taw* (sacred/royal). Every time a

³ The Rajadhammasangaha (1878), by Yaw Atwinwun U Hpo Hlaing during King Thibaw’s accession, represents the historical precedent for *sadan* as constitutional constraint on sovereign power. Ostensibly a ‘book of the proper behaviour for Kings,’ it was in practice a constitutional attempt to limit the king’s access to the treasury and bind him to cabinet decisions (Thant Myint-U 2001; Ma Yi Yi 1976). Queen Supayalat violently opposed this textual discipline, viewing the reforms as reducing the king to a ‘puppet’ and encroachment on royal prerogative. The parallel with the military’s rejection of the Federal Democracy Charter is structural: sovereigns who rule through *kyei nya gyet* resist the *sadan* that would bind them.

⁴ On ‘emergent federalism’ as governance built through service provision rather than constitutional grant, see South (2021; 2025). ISP-Myanmar’s territorial monitoring (2024; 2025a; 2025b; 2025c) documents the archipelago of distinct authorities this chapter describes.

Burmese speaker says ‘I’ in polite society, they grammatically reaffirm their status as a subject. Women’s usage is starker: *kya-ma* (ကျမ) means simply ‘female slave,’ without even the elevating *taw* suffix. An earlier first-person form, *kyun-nok*, combined *kyun* with *nok* (insignificant), encoding not just service but ‘insignificant servitude.’ The morpheme is not merely metaphorical. Pagan-era stone inscriptions record *kyun* (*kywan*) as a legal-cosmological category: persons were inscribed into pagoda service through documentary acts, their names, kinship, vocations, and conditions of dedication carved in stone. The pronoun preserves the social institution. Each of these forms is a tributary I: the self grammatically rendered as tribute to a superior in the moment of its utterance. *Nga*, by contrast, is the reciprocal I: the self that addresses an equal, that speaks across rather than upward, that presupposes no hierarchy to acknowledge before it can say anything at all.

When the Dobama nationalists chose *[nga]-do* over *kyunaw-do*, they were not selecting a register; they were performing a coup in grammar, replacing ‘royal slaves’ with ‘intimate equals.’ The second element, *do*, carries the contraction’s political logic. In ordinary Burmese, *nga-do* is an intimate plural — used between close friends, within families, among peers who have suspended rank. It is not a neutral ‘we’; it encodes warmth, equality, and the temporary dissolution of social distance. When the Dobama nationalists contracted *nga-do* to *do*, they did three things simultaneously. They made the transgressive assumed, but unspoken, *nga* chantable: distributed across a collective voice, the pronoun that would mark any single speaker as insubordinate becomes the property of everyone and therefore of no one in particular. They claimed that the entire nation stood in the intimate relation of *nga-do* to Burma itself: not subjects of a sovereign but intimates of a shared home, equals whose bond preceded and superseded the hierarchies the literary register encodes.

And they forced the colloquial spelling onto the page. Literary Burmese writes *to* (တို); the spoken colloquial form is *do* (ဒို). The Dobama insisted on *do* in print — refusing to let the literary apparatus correct the people’s pronunciation back into respectability. The orthographic choice was itself a political act: the chant would be written as it was spoken, not as the register demanded. But this is also *do*’s structural vulnerability. The intimate plural specifies solidarity without specifying membership: it declares that this cause ‘belongs to us’ without defining who ‘us’ includes. *Do* names a collective but cannot bind it. It is the pronoun of solidarity before the compact that solidarity requires.

The literary performance of that coupling preceded the political one by a decade. Maung Htin, a founding member of the Khit-San (‘Testing the Era’) movement of 1928–1929, wrote his masterpiece *Nga Ba* (published 1947) as a deliberate act of bringing the excluded onto the written page. The novel’s protagonist carries the low-status prefix *nga* in his very name: in Burmese, *nga* precedes the names of social inferiors, fish, and those without standing in the literary register. A man named Nga Ba cannot appear in formal written Burmese as a speaking subject; the name itself places him outside the community to which the literary apparatus belongs.

Maung Htin’s solution was not to translate his peasant into the literary register but to write him exclusively in colloquial delta-region speech — a grammar of rustic dialogue that the Khit-San movement had consciously modelled on the English Romantic literary revolution,

developing 'literary style not far removed from current colloquial speech' (Maung Tun Myint 1971: 15; Hla Pe 1968: 138). The thesis that documents Nga Ba's dialogue grammar confirms this throughout: characters address each other as Ko Nga Ba — peer-to-peer colloquial form, neither the formal U nor the deferential *kyun*-compounds the literary register requires. The first-person pronouns recorded are *kyun-daw* and *kyun-ma* ('royal slave,' 'female slave') — precisely the enslaved self-encodings that the Dobama nationalists would then overturn with *nga-do*. What Maung Htin performed in fiction in 1943 — giving the *nga*-marked peasant a voice in his own register, inscribing the colloquial onto the page against the resistance of literary convention — the Dobama movement performed in politics. Both are acts of forced inscription: bringing onto the page what the literary apparatus was designed to exclude.⁵

The third element carries a different burden. *Ayei* (အရေး) denotes both 'course of events, affairs, matter, crisis' and, through identical spelling and pronunciation, 'line, streak; outlining, writing' (Stewart & Dunn 1940: 317–319). Whether etymologically unified or phonetically coincident, the pairing creates a conceptual coupling that Burmese speakers recognise: an *aye*i (affair/crisis) that lacks *aye*i (inscription) remains politically incomplete, a cause awaiting the documentary act that would render it permanent. This duality extends through the term's verbal compounds: *aye*i-yu (အရေးယူ) means both 'to take action' and 'to take into account/regard seriously,' suggesting that genuine response to a cause requires systematic attention. *Aye*i-ahtun (အရေးအတွင်း) denotes the 'vitality' or 'critical urgency' of an affair, while *aye*i-atha (အရေးအသား) refers specifically to 'writing style' or 'composition.'

The 1988 uprising possessed *aye*i-ahtun (urgency) but lacked *aye*i-atha (codified written form). The military filled the documentary void with its own *aye*i-atha (the 2008 Constitution), converting revolutionary vitality into a new cycle of centralised authority while eliminating the implied⁶ *nga do*: the formal legal register has no place for the colloquial pronoun of solidarity. This is *aye*i's distinctive burden: not merely that cause requires inscription, but that the inscription must be prospective rather than retrospective — a compact that binds the collective to future terms, not a chronicle that validates what a sovereign has already done.

Weber feared that routinization would eventually suffocate revolutionary charisma, the written record displacing the spirit that produced it (Weber 1978: 246–54). Yet *aye*i

⁵ The *nga* prefix in names of colonial-era defendants is documented throughout the Lower Burma Rulings. Representative examples include Nga Nyein, sentenced to rigorous imprisonment after being reported as a reputed thief and gambling daing; Nga Pyu, whose voluntary confession was evaluated by the courts; Nga Hnin (a village headman) and Nga Shwe Di, convicted of attempting to bribe a magistrate; and Nga Ba Tu, convicted of culpable homicide after a drowning during a tattooing ritual. A Royal Order of 3 March 1806 similarly uses the prefix for a common worker: 'Nga Pu is appointed Chief of Workers who use Curtains to cover Unsightly Things from the Royal View.' The prefix thus functioned as a standard marker for male commoners and subordinates across both pre-colonial and colonial legal records.

⁶ Notably, while Stewart and Dunn (1940) present *aye*i's dual meanings as semantic fusion, the Myanmar Language Commission's 1993 edition does not maintain this explicit link, suggesting official efforts to decouple 'cause' from 'documentation' in state-sanctioned discourse.

encodes a relationship between movement and inscription that resists Weber's opposition between them. In the Burmese word, cause and documentation are cognates rather than antagonists: the movement does not die when it becomes written; it becomes real. The 1988 uprising demonstrates what happens when they are separated: a cause that produced individual 'sadan' but no binding inscription left a void for others to fill. Weber assumed charisma required a bearer, a prophet whose personal authority animated the text. *Ayei* suggests a complication: it names the act of inscription itself as the movement's charismatic centre. When protesters chant *do ayei*, they invoke not a person but a demand that fuses struggle with documentation. What the current resistance requires is their reunion: *do ayei* as both cause and binding inscription, the charismatic charge lodged not in a prophet but in the collective act of documentation the word demands.

Campaign chronicles enacted this fusion between cause and inscription most directly. *Ayeidawbon* (အရေးတော်ပုံ) combines *aye* (affairs/writing) with *taw* (royal/sacred) and *bon* (form/chronicle), signifying both royal campaigns and their written documentation (Stewart & Dunn 1940: 319). The compound's grammar is revealing. The *-taw* suffix reserves agency for sovereign authority: a *taw* action is performed by or on behalf of the crown. The *-bon* element marks the genre as retrospective narrative, an account composed after the event it records. *Ayeidawbon* could only be written once the sovereign had already prevailed; the chronicle validated the campaign by narrating it as the restoration of rightful order.

Taylor (1983) identified this as structurally cyclical: a righteous claimant emerges during disorder, restores central authority, and validates his reign through retrospective documentation. The genre assumes that political disorder is temporary and that its resolution produces a new centre capable of commissioning its own history. This is not revolution but succession. The *ayeidawbon* narrates the replacement of one sovereign by another while leaving the vertical relation between ruler and subject undisturbed. Named chronicles from the Toungoo, Konbaung, and Rakhine traditions — the *Hanthawaddy Hsinbyushin Ayedawbon*, the *Alaungpaya Ayedawbon*, the *Dhanyawaddy Ayedawbon* — all follow the same grammar: commission after victory, chronicle as validation. The genre's tenacity is most visible in its twentieth-century migration. When Thakin nationalists named the 1938 general strikes the *Htaung thon ya pyei ayeidawbon* — the 1300 Revolution — they claimed royal documentary grammar for a mass uprising. But the structure they inherited was retrospective: it could validate a campaign already won. It had no mechanism for binding the collective to what came next.

The twentieth-century term *tawhlanyei* (တော်လှန်ရေး) offered what Taylor read as a contrasting vision: linear transformation of structure rather than cyclical restoration of hierarchy (Taylor 1983: 101–104). The verb *taw-lan* means 'to overturn royalty,' and the compound promised precisely that. Yet its grammar remains tethered to the sovereign position it claims to abolish. You cannot *taw-lan* without a *taw* to overturn; the act of revolution is defined in relation to the authority it contests. Linguistically, *yei* in *tawhlanyei* is a different morpheme from *aye*: it functions as a nominalizing suffix, transforming the verb into an abstract noun. The term names the act of overturning without invoking the documentary resonance of *aye*. It describes the moment of rupture, not the inscription that would stabilize what follows. Post-independence regimes deployed *tawhlanyei* rhetoric

while enacting *ayeidawbon* logic, changing rulers without changing the vertical relation between state and subject. The mechanism was visible in the naming. The party that governed Burma after 1948 called itself the *Ayeidawbon* Party, and its programme reflected the term's logic: revolution as managed historical process, not structural rupture.

When the 1962 Revolutionary Council chose *tawhlanye*i as its name, the choice was an explicit repudiation: the civilian government had betrayed the revolution by domesticating its vocabulary (Taylor 1983: 108–112). Communists, socialists, the 1962 Revolutionary Council, and today's resistance have all reached for this word. None has completed what it promises.

But Taylor's reading, which treats *tawhlanye*i as a modern secular concept, misses its deeper register. The verb *taw-hlan* carries older Buddhist resonance that predates its political usage. Pagan-era inscriptions used the term for 'revolution against greed that produces the condition of slavery' (Than Tun 1978: 112), locating the revolutionary act in the uprooting of mental defilement rather than the overthrow of political authority.⁷ This register need not be consciously activated by contemporary speakers for it to shape the political imagination. It persists as structural inheritance in the language, conditioning what *tawhlanye*i can mean even when its Buddhist genealogy goes unnoticed.

The Vessantara Jataka uses *taw hlan thi* for the redemption of the prince's children from bondage to the Brahmin Zuzaka, framing liberation as release from ownership. Most significantly, monks seeking ordination must answer the ritual question *taw hlan tha la* ('have you freed yourself from royal service?'), establishing freedom from worldly authority as prerequisite for entering the *sangha* (Houtman 1999). This is not merely formulaic. Four categories of slavery are enumerated, the candidate must confirm freedom from each, and only then may ordination proceed. Teizàwbatha argues in his *Atta tawhlanye*i ('*Revolution against the self*') that the concept implied in the ordination rite means monks are 'revolutionaries against the self,' engaged in uprooting the 'buildings of the enemy': *samsara*, wrong-viewedness, and craving (*tanha*).

There is an overlap between emancipation from the king, from slavery, and from the 'I' itself. The Burmese first-person pronoun *kyun-taw* ('your holiness's slave') grammatically encodes the very bondage the monk renounces. To answer *taw hlan* at ordination is to free oneself from the pronoun that encodes servitude in the act of speaking it, the closed vertical loop analysed above. This is liberation of the most radical kind. But it is individual.

⁷ The inscription (Pl. 10a, A.D. 1190) records Singhasura, minister of King Cansu, dedicating property in aid of his salvation: *ranimak kywan aphyac mha te ii taw than luiw rakal*, which Luce translates as 'I want to rebel against this world of slavery to appetite' (Luce, JBRS XXVI, iii: 135). The same chapter documents kings, princesses, ministers, and commoners voluntarily dedicating themselves and their families as *kywan* to pagodas through stone inscriptions. One became *kywan* through the act of inscription itself: the documentary technology that constituted Pagan-era bonded service is the ancestor of the *sadan* this article argues the resistance must repurpose for horizontal ends. Whole *kywan* villages existed with headmen, cultivators, craftsmen, and musicians; persons were classified by kinship, vocation, literacy, and ethnicity. The modern pronoun *kyunaw* preserves not merely a metaphor of servitude but the trace of a specific institution in which persons were inscribed into vertical relationships through stone records (Than Tun 1978: 143–162).

The monk frees himself. The ordination question is singular. The revolution against the self is interior work, not compact-making between equals.

Ne Win confirmed this priority in his own person. Having conducted political *tawhlanyei* in 1962 and spiritual *tawhlanyei* through Ledi Sayadaw's *anapana* meditation in retirement, he denigrated his own revolution as trivial compared to the interior conquest. The most powerful political revolutionary in modern Burmese history concluded that political revolution was beside the point. The Buddhist register did not merely coexist with the political register; it superseded it, even for the man who had wielded both.

Tawhlanyei thus operates in three registers, and all three run along the vertical axis. In the political register, it replaces who sits at the apex; the axis itself remains. In the soteriological register, it uproots mental defilement within the individual mind; the monk frees himself, alone. In the grammatical register, it remains tethered to the *taw* it contests; no overturning is conceivable without a sovereign to overturn. None of the three generates the lateral movement between equals that a compact requires. The gap between chant and compact is not a practical failure of documentation. It is a conceptual gap between a revolutionary tradition oriented along the vertical axis and a documentary act that requires a horizontal one. The absence of group-constitutive vocabulary in the language of revolution is not uniquely Burmese, but the grammatical entrenchment of individual political agency runs unusually deep. What the three registers share is not merely a vertical axis but an individual agent: one sovereign replaces another, one mind purifies itself, one pronoun contests its master. None produces the group subject a compact requires. And when *tawhlanyei* does collectivize, as in the Spring Revolution's mass mobilization, the collective it produces is one of shared identity rather than shared agreement. The crowd that chants together shares a cause; it does not yet share a compact. The Buddhist *tawhlanyei* tradition supplies no conceptual vocabulary for a 'we' constituted by mutual binding rather than by common belonging.

English 'revolution' shares the astronomical etymology: cyclical return, not departure. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 meant restoration of sovereign order. But since 1789, the English term has accumulated connotations of collective constituent power that its Burmese counterpart has not. When the French Revolution's drafters wrote 'We the Nation,' they were constituting a group political subject, however imperfectly. English 'citizen,' 'rights,' and 'revolution' were all vertical in origin, and each required centuries of republican argument to acquire group-agency connotations. The process was neither smooth nor complete: Jefferson wrote 'all men are created equal' in a slaveholding society, and the word 'revolution' remains capturable by any vanguard that claims it. But the direction of the reworking was consistent: from individual privilege to group entitlement, from royal grant to collective claim. Burmese political vocabulary has not undergone that reworking. The military interrupted it in 1962, again in 1988, and again in 2021.

Tawhlanyei retains the individual-agency structure its etymology encodes: revolution as what happens when one ruler replaces another, when one monk frees himself, when the wheel turns. The scoring gap measured in the constitutional analysis below reflects the accumulated distance between a vocabulary that has been reworked for group agency and one that has not. The implication strengthens the article's conclusion: assembly has been done before, in English. It has not yet been done in Burmese.

The state's vocabulary works the same vertical logic from above. Before a political event earns even the neutralized label *ayei-ahkin*, the state deploys cruder instruments. *Pone-kan* (ပုန်ကန်, mutiny) classifies rebellion as a crime against vertical order. The Tipitaka Myanma Abhidan links it to the Pali *dubbha* (treachery, injury against a superior): the rebel is a *thu-pon* (သူပုန်), one who has breached the bond between lower and higher. *Hsu-pu* (ဆူပူ, boiling, unrest) strips political agency entirely, reducing mobilization to thermal disorder, a liquid that has reached its boiling point rather than a people who have reached a political decision. Only when neither label contains the event does the state concede the more measured *ayei-ahkin*. The state's preferred vocabulary strips the political subject from the event entirely. *Ayei-ahkin* (အရေးအခင်း) pairs *ayei* (affair/matter) with *ahkin* (occurrence, contingency, juncture), framing political upheaval as something that arrived rather than something citizens created. The 1988 uprising is routinely rendered in official histories as the *shit-lei-lon ayei-ahkin*, the four-eights affair. The compound has no grammatical slot for a political agent: nobody acted; a situation reached a critical juncture. The bureaucratic register serves the state precisely because it deflects causation. Where *ayeidawbon* at least required a sovereign subject who campaigned and prevailed, *ayei-ahkin* reduces mass mobilization to incident, an occurrence to be managed and eventually suppressed. It is the regime's preferred terminology, the framing that appears in official histories and state media, where revolution becomes disturbance and popular agency becomes disorder.

Do ayei (ဒို့အရေး), the term the resistance actually chose, breaks the pattern by inserting a collective pronoun where the grammar of the preceding terms expects either nobody (*ahkin*) or a sovereign (*-taw*). When the resistance chants *do ayei*, it invokes not merely political overturning but the documentary act that stabilizes transformation. The possessive *do* collectivizes what the ordination ritual and renunciation techniques conceive as individual: where the monk frees himself from royal service, the resistance frees a people through shared inscription. The term's force is doubled by the duality of *ayei* established above: it claims both the cause and the inscription that would render the cause permanent.

Yet *do ayei*'s primary force operates through voiced collective chant, forged in sonic mobilization rather than fixed text. The slogan declares the revolution 'ours' through performance. It is present-tense and declarative. It asserts collective ownership of the struggle in the moment of its utterance without binding the collective to future terms. The *do* announces who the struggle belongs to; the *ayei* invokes the fusion of cause and inscription; but the compound does not specify what the collective has agreed to, what it will hold itself to once the chanting stops and the work of governance begins. During the 1988 uprising a short-lived newspaper appeared under the same name, its title enacting the very claim its pages could not yet consolidate.⁸ The Thingyan water festival, the one

⁸ The chant operated as call-and-response: a specific demand was named, then ဒို့အရေး repeated twice as collective affirmation. Documented variants include ဒီမိုကရေစီရရှိရေး ဒို့အရေး (achieving democracy — our cause), ဖက်ဆစ်အစိုးရရှုံး ဖြိုထချရေး ဒို့အရေး (overthrowing the fascist government — our cause), and အော်အောင်ဆန်စုကြည်း လွတ်မြောက်ရေး ဒို့အရေး (freeing Aung San Suu Kyi — our cause). A short-lived newspaper appeared under the name ဒို့အရေး during the uprising, ceasing after only a few issues. First-person accounts include Phone Myint's memoir at MoeMaKa Media (https://www.moemaka.com/2021/08/blog-post_6.html) and Ko Aung Naing Oo's blog account of

annual occasion when hierarchical address conventions suspend and strangers speak in the colloquial register without rank, demonstrated this publicly in April 1989 — and the regime’s immediate counter-inscription confirmed that it understood the political stakes of horizontal speech precisely as well as the protesters did, as the following section details (Houtman 1999).

The four terms map the temporal field of Myanmar’s political vocabulary, and the gap they leave open is the decisive one. *Ayeidawbon* looks backward: the sovereign prevailed, and the chronicle validates his campaign after the fact. *Tawhlanyei* names an aspiration that has never been completed: each generation has claimed to overturn royal authority, and each has reconstituted it in new form; in its deepest Buddhist register, the liberation it envisions is individual and spiritual, the uprooting of the enslaved ‘I,’ not the binding of a collective ‘we.’ *Ayei-ahkin* looks backward with the subject removed: something happened, nobody is responsible, order was eventually restored. *Do ayei* claims the present moment of collective refusal and collective ownership. None of the four looks forward to articulate what the collective will hold itself to across time. Within the lexicon of political upheaval, *do ayei* is the sole term that drops the vertical axis, replacing the question of whom you are fighting with the assertion of who is fighting. That it has not yet generated the forward-looking document its own grammar promises is the gap this essay addresses.

The movement named after 2021 confirms this. By calling itself the Spring Revolution — နွေဦးတော်လှန်ရေး — it placed the uprising within a global sequence of seasonal overturnings, from 1848 to Prague 1968 to the Arab Spring. The metaphor intends rupture. But spring is cyclical: after spring, winter. The vocabulary of irreversible transformation borrows imagery that encodes return. The global resonance of ‘spring’ imports a liberal political imaginary of irreversible democratic opening. Yet the Burmese compound tethers that aspiration to *tawhlanyei*, and with it to the vertical axis the preceding analysis has traced. The 2021 movement’s self-naming reaches outward toward a global tradition of rupture and inward toward a Burmese tradition in which revolution has never escaped the sovereign position it contests.

Prasse-Freeman (2023) distinguishes resistance (direct contestation inviting sovereign response) from refusal (turning away to build capacity under repression). The 2021 movement operates in both registers: the *bu* (refusal) campaigns made the state unworkable, while *do ayei* performs the affirmative claim to governance. Yet refusal alone cannot construct new order. The empty ministry desk, the silent railway, the shuttered clinic prove sovereign decree impotent without popular consent. But these acts of bodily witness inscribe only what the resistance opposes, not what it proposes. The *sadan* is necessary to formalize what the body has already declared, converting negation into articulation, the movement’s capacity for governance from opacity into legibility.

writers and artists marching on 8 August 1988, raising fists and chanting ဒီမိုကရေစီ ရရှိရေး — ဒို့အရေး, while writers Mya Than Tint and U Win Tin marched discussing strategy (https://koaungnaingoo.blogspot.com/2021/01/blog-post_6.html).

Co-option after 1988

The slogan's institutional embedding began in September 1988, when the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), after killing an estimated 3,000 *do ayei*-chanting protesters, announced its ideological foundation. Enforcement preceded theory: the slogan was printed on the inside cover of every book and publication, broadcast over radio, displayed on signboards — a brute-force documentary regime operating through compulsion rather than argument. Only in 1994 did Minye Kaungbon's treatise 'Our Three Main National Causes' (*do tawun ayei thon ba*), compiled from 44 articles serialised in state newspapers between July 1993 and June 1994 and published by the state's own News and Periodicals Enterprise, provide the ideological justification for what had already been institutionally embedded for six years. The resistance chanted; the military published. Coercion preceded theory by half a decade. The constitution simply encoded what the population had already been trained to accept: to a local audience, Crouch notes, the three principles 'are not new and did not first appear in the Constitution' — instead 'society has been socialised in these principles for several decades' before 2008 (Crouch 2019: 3). The military encoded this appropriation into permanent law: 'do tawun ayei thon ba' appears nine times in the 2008 Constitution, transforming the protesters' grammar of collective ownership into the state's grammar of sovereign command. The constitutional text arrived as ratification, not revelation.⁹

The precise moment of capture is recoverable. During the Thingyan water festival of 13–17 April 1989, Aung San Suu Kyi had enabled a public contest of anti-military slogans — horizontal political speech¹⁰ in what is also the one annual occasion when hierarchical address conventions suspend and strangers speak in the colloquial register without rank. The regime's response was immediate. On 16 April 1989 SLORC established a 24-member Committee for Writing Slogans for Nationals, tasked with re-establishing control over political discourse and improving 'the spirit of patriotism.' Within days the committee had produced its counter-inscription, converting the festival's horizontal political speech into the vertical grammar of state command.

The slogans' visual translation was equally deliberate. The unity they proclaimed was rendered on posters and billboards as a young man testing the tensile strength of a tied bundle of bamboo while an old man watches approvingly — individual ethnic strands

⁹ The military's continued deployment of ခွဲတာဝန်အရေးသုံးပါး is visible across state media: see Myawady (<https://www.myawady.net.mm/>) and Ministry of Information (<https://www.moi.gov.mm/news/21755>). For the 2021 revival, the TikTok hashtag #ဒီမိုကရေစီရရှိရေးခွဲအရေးခွဲအရေး had accumulated over 482,700 views by early 2022 (<https://www.tiktok.com/tag/ဒီမိုကရေစီရရှိရေးခွဲအရေးခွဲအရေး>).

¹⁰ In Houtman (1999) I used the horizontal/vertical axis differently from this article. Table 6 labels the SLORC's model 'horizontal bounded' (meaning territorially fixed geography) and the NLD's model 'vertical Buddhist mental' (meaning cosmologically open and unbounded). This article uses the terms in the social rather than spatial sense, as defined above: vertical = hierarchical address and tributary obligation; horizontal = reciprocal obligation between equals. The two frameworks are compatible — the military's bounded geographic conception forecloses exactly the open cosmological register the NLD mobilises — but readers consulting Houtman (1999: 61) should note the terminological difference (Tambiah 1976: 102–31).

bound together, their unity verified by the senior generation (Houtman 1999: 67). By 1992 the slogans had been organised in symmetrical threes and fours, structured, as I noted in my earlier study, like the way monks and ritual masters (*beik-theik saya*) remember the numbered categories of ancient wisdom, and explicitly modelled on the Three Noble Jewels and the Four Noble Truths of the Buddha (1999: 67). The regime was not merely co-opting a resistance vocabulary. It was encoding vertical command in the cognitive form of *dhamma*: to question the three causes was to place oneself outside received truth. Against this compulsory inscription, print-houses found one small measure of counter-documentation. They left the mandatory slogan pages uncut, so that the page could not be turned and the text could not be read — a binding error too minor to punish in a totalitarian state (1999: 68). The scarcity of authoritative record under military rule produced ingenuity at its margins.

[Fig. 1. Cover of the Burmese version of Minye Kaungbon's *Do Tawun Ayei Thon Ba* (Our Three Main National Causes, 1994/1995), featuring a regime-commissioned sculpture visualizing the military's unity doctrine.]

The military co-opted each element of the slogan. Adding 'duty' (*tawun*) shifted the frame from rights claimed by people to obligations imposed by the state. 'Our' appropriated collective spirit; 'National Causes' recast political demands as existential imperatives (Crouch 2019: 37). The three principles were not merely listed in the 2008 Constitution; they were built into its load-bearing architecture. Section 48 established the Basic Principles as a guide for the courts in interpreting all other provisions: any disputed constitutional question must be resolved by reference to the three causes (Crouch 2019: 30). Section 417 made threatening them the trigger for the Commander-in-Chief to assume complete control with all sovereign powers conferred directly on him (Crouch 2019: 51). Chapter VIII converted them into citizens' legally binding duties — every person 'under a duty to uphold' the three causes, s 283 — placing obligation prior to any right: the constitutional mandate for duties 'is designed to come conceptually prior to the granting of constitutional rights,' using obligation to require obedience before any right may be exercised (Crouch 2019: 197). Schedule Four required every elected representative to swear them in their oath of office (Crouch 2019: 40). The stolen chant became a constitutional tripwire: invoking democracy could now be framed as threatening non-disintegration of the Union, triggering section 417 and military seizure of power.¹¹

Minye Kaungbon made explicit what the constitutional architecture implied. The Tatmadaw, he argued, represents no political ideology whatever, no particular class, no particular national group, no particular territory: 'The Tatmadaw represents Our Three Main National Causes. It represents all Myanmar citizens, all national groups living in Myanmar, all classes of people that are in Myanmar, the whole of Myanmar' (cited in Houtman 1999: 69). The absorption was complete. *Do* had been reclaimed entirely: the army was the collective 'our'. The army operates through *ana* (coercive authority) rather

¹¹ The three causes are pervasive in the 2008 Constitution, appearing strategically in the Preamble, Basic Principles (Ch. I, § 6(a)-(c)), required oaths (President, VPs, legislators), Duties of Citizens (§ 383), and mandated objectives for Political Parties (§ 404(a), Sch. 4).

than *awza* (legitimate influence), meaning it has no popular foundation and is therefore structurally immune to compact-based accountability (1999: 69).

Beneath these element-by-element substitutions lies a single structural reversal: the colloquial register returned to the literary. The chant was spoken in the warm, intimate register the Dobama nationalists had wrested into print — the *do* of peers, the colloquial spelling the literary apparatus had always sought to correct back into to. The 2008 Constitution writes *to tawun ayei thon ba* in formal literary Burmese, the register of sovereign command, of obligation markers and downward-flowing duty. The Khit-San writers and the Dobama nationalists had refused this register precisely because it encodes the tributary I as the default political subject. The military restores it, converting the chant's oral warmth into written tribute: the reciprocal I of the protesters becomes the tributary I of the constitution's subjects, duty owed upward to the state that has inscribed their cause for them.

The renaming of Burma to Myanmar, effected by the Adaptation of Expressions Law of 18 June 1989, performed the same operation on the country's name — part of the broader programme of what I have elsewhere called Myanmafication (1999: 44–75). In Burmese, Bama and Myanma denote the same people and territory, but on different linguistic planes: Bama is the colloquial, everyday register used by the masses; Myanma is the formal, elevated, literary register of royal chronicles and state authority. The military had viewed colloquial language as inherently subversive since 1962, associating it with undesirable political opposition (Houtman 1999: 49). By legally mandating the literary Myanmar in all official documents and foreign communications, the regime erased the colloquial name of the country from authorised discourse — forcing, as Houtman documents, 'the application of the literary reference to centralise and assert maximum control over grass-root ideas about the country' (1999: 49). The operation was directed outward as much as inward: the regime insisted on compelling English speakers and the entire international community 'to implement the literary over the colloquial version of the country's name even when they are speaking rather than writing' — exporting its internal censorship hierarchy into international discourse (Houtman 1999: 50--51).

Aung San Suu Kyi's sustained refusal to adopt Myanmar — continuing to use Burma and Bama in speeches and writing — was itself a documentary act: an insistence on the colloquial register as the political language of the resistance. The ten weeks from 16 April to 20 July 1989 constitute a coordinated linguistic counter-offensive: slogan committee, naming commission, Adaptation of Expressions Law, house arrest. Four institutional moves targeting the same axis — colloquial against literary, reciprocal against tributary — that the resistance had been working since the Dobama nationalists insisted on the colloquial spelling in the 1930s.

The two operations were one. *Nga-do* (ငါတို့) effectively became *kyundaw-to* (ကျွန်တော်တို့) again: the intimate, transgressive first-person plural was replaced by 'royal slaves we,' and the colloquial spelling ခို့ was corrected back to the literary တို့ that the Dobama had refused. Do-Bama (ဒို့ဗမာ) effectively became To-Myanmar (တို့မြန်မာ): the possessive, colloquial name the Dobama had claimed was replaced by the formal literary To-Myanmar of the royal chronicle tradition. Together the moves accomplished a complete rehierarchyisation.

The horizontal compact vocabulary forged since the 1930s — the intimate *do* and the colloquial *Bama* — was absorbed into the vertical register of state command. What the Dobama nationalists had built over a decade of deliberate linguistic insurgency was dismantled in ten weeks through four institutional instruments: slogan committee, naming commission, Adaptation of Expressions Law, house arrest. The [nga]-do-Bama (ငါ့ဒိုဗမာ) became [kyundaw]-to-Myanmar (ကျွန်တော်တို့မြန်မာ): the intimate equals of the nationalist imagination became the royal slaves of the constitutional order.

[Fig. 2. ‘Our Three Main National Causes’ (*do tawun ayei thon ba*) as compulsorily printed in publications and displayed on signboards since 1990.]

SLORC issued Declaration 1/90 not on the day of the NLD’s election victory; but on its eve, the night before over 500 elected representatives gathered at Gandhi Hall to issue their own constitutional demand. SLORC was monitoring resistance documentary activity and moved to inscribe first. By declaring that elected representatives held only the duty to draft a constitution — not to govern — and that any constitution must align with the Three Main National Causes, the declaration pre-empted the NLD’s document before it could be issued. The inscription contest was deliberate before the resistance knew it had begun. When the National Convention opened in January 1993, its Procedural Code locked the three causes in as the inescapable framework on the first day, before any discussion had taken place. SLORC Order 5/96 subsequently criminalised deviation from them outside the convention. The fourteen-year drafting process was administrative theatre: the constitutional text was determined in 1990, not 2008.

In Austin’s (1962) terms, the military’s declaration achieved ‘uptake’ through institutional compulsion and coercion (*ana*) rather than moral persuasion (*awza*) required for felicitous speech acts. This constituted an ‘abuse’ of declarative convention, functioning as sovereign proclamation (*kyei nya gyet*) enforced by executive order (*amein*) and the gun, contrasting with voluntary acceptance required for moral witness (*sadan*). From 1990 until 2021, the people’s liberation chant served as constitutional architecture of oppression. The 2008 Constitution is itself an *aye* in the fullest sense: an inscription that completed the chant’s own demand for documentation and turned it against the people who made the demand. The military understood the article’s central argument before the resistance did. They knew that oral aspiration without inscription remains politically incomplete; they supplied the inscription, on their own terms, with their own grammar, enforced by compulsion rather than consent. What they changed was not the word *aye* but its subject.

This co-option was not merely linguistic but institutional. The 1962 coup was launched to suppress a specific ethnic *sadan*: the Federal Proposal of 1961, a forty-page constitutional roadmap ratified by delegates across the Shan State at Taunggyi on 25 February 1961. The document diagnosed with precision the defects that had reduced the 1947 Constitution from genuine federation to ‘in theory federal, but in practice unitary,’ as the constitutional advisor U Chan Htoon himself later admitted. Ne Win’s seizure of power weeks before the scheduled parliamentary debate was a preemptive strike by *amein* against *sagyok*. For six

decades thereafter, sovereign proclamation displaced moral witness as the dominant mode of political communication.¹²

The appropriation succeeded because military and civilian leaders shared the same intellectual formation. The Revolutionary Council's cadres had emerged from the same nationalist seminars, read the same Dobama pamphlets, and absorbed the same anti-colonial treatises as the politicians they displaced. Their fluency in resistance vocabulary was genuine, which made capture all the more effective. The 1974 Constitution reveals this pattern in its most complete form. Its Preamble deploys language of striking horizontality: the people have 'lived in harmony and unity sharing joys and sorrows' and display a 'spirit of mutual help and sacrifice.' Article 14 promises 'mutual reporting, mutually offering, accepting and respecting of advice and wishes.' Yet the same article defines 'socialist democratic practices' as 'lower organs carrying out the decisions and directives of the higher organs.' The vocabulary is horizontal; the grammar is command. The BSPP was the 'sole political party that shall lead the State.' The Preamble that praised working people required them to 'faithfully follow' that party's leadership. The lesson is that a vocabulary swap is not a structural shift; the grammar of command can survive any change of nouns. Contemporary compacts therefore require structural safeguards: distributed interpretive authority, built-in accountability, and requirements for continuous recognition by multiple parties.

Today's resistance actors consciously reclaim and transform *do ayei*, demonstrating how movements perform new meanings into existence. Its modern reclamation fosters new horizontal solidarity, where 'Our' begins detaching from ethnicity, attaching to shared ethical purpose. Yet the chant carries historical baggage. The 1930s Dobama movement that first popularized possessive nationalism evolved into an explicitly Bamar-centric model; to ethnic minorities, *do ayei* can still signal 'Bamar mob' rather than 'Federal Union.' More fundamentally, the Dobama's *do* was inversion rather than horizontalization: pairing *do* with *Thakin* (Master), they claimed the sovereign slot rather than abolishing it, producing a 'Republic of Kings' where everyone asserted mastery rather than a federation where none did. Whether the 2021 *do ayei* escapes this ethnic encoding depends not on the pronoun alone but on who actually co-signs the compact it demands.

Each stage represents an attempt to overcome the particle's structural limitation: that it constitutes individuals around a focal self rather than constituting a group. The evolution of *do* traces three stages, not two. The Dobama's *do* was possessive: *Bama pyi thi do pyi* (ဗမာပြည်သည် ဒို့ပြည် 'Burma is our country'), *Bama sa thi do sa* (ဗမာပြည်သည် ဒို့ပြည် 'Burmese literature is our literature'). It claimed territory and language for a specific

¹² The suppression of federalist vocabulary after 1962 exemplifies what Irvine and Gal (2000) term 'erasure': a semiotic process through which language ideology renders inconvenient social complexity invisible. When the Revolutionary Council declared federalism equivalent to national disintegration, it did not merely prohibit a political arrangement; it made an entire documentary vocabulary unspeakable. The associated process of 'fractal recursivity' — projecting oppositions at one level onto others — helps explain how the centre-periphery opposition was mapped recursively onto Bamar-ethnic, military-civilian, and literary-colloquial distinctions, so that to write in the colloquial register came to be perceived as politically subversive and to use the literary register came to be perceived as inherently authoritative. The footnote at note 12 above documents how Ne Win's government crushed the Modern Burmese Writing movement on precisely these grounds.

ethnicity. The Dobama anthem, ‘ဒို့မသီချင်း’ (‘Our Burma Song’), written by WMB Thakin Tin, made this possessive *do* the emotional centre of anti-colonial resistance: ‘ဒို့မာ... ဒို့မာ မဟုတ်လေသလော’ (‘Our Burma...aren’t we Burmese?’). The song later became the national anthem, embedding the informal, horizontal *do* into the founding ceremonial text of the independent state — the same pronoun the military would later enlist for its own vertical purposes.

The *do ayei* of 1988 was different: it named a shared grievance rather than a possession, but it functioned as petition rather than compact — an appeal directed upward to the state for democratic reform, not a binding agreement among equals. The 1988 chanters were demanding that their cause be inscribed by the authority that monopolised inscription. It was the wrong question. The military answered it: within two years the junta had captured it as *do tawun ayei thon ba*, ‘our three main national causes,’ an instrument of command.

The 2021 *do ayei* attempts something neither predecessor achieved: grounding the chant in a written compact. The Federal Democracy Charter gives *do* a documentary home for the first time — named parties, enforceable commitments, sovereignty flowing upward. The pronoun has not changed. Its political grammar has shifted from possession through petition to compact. Whether the third stage holds depends on whether the charter can transition from moral witness (*sadan*) to binding treaty (*sagyok*) — and on whether *do* can shed the ethnic boundedness it carried in the 1930s to become the pronoun of a political covenant rather than a racial category.

The difficulty is not merely that Burmese grammar encodes hierarchy. It is that the grammar cannot constitute a group political subject. Western revolutionary traditions presuppose collective agency: ‘the people’ act, ‘the nation’ declares, ‘citizens’ bind themselves to one another. The grammar of English permits a ‘we’ that is not anchored to any particular ‘I.’ Burmese does not. The plural particle reveals why. The grammatical form is less neutral than it appears. Burmese distinguishes two kinds of plural. *Dwei* (ငွေ) marks a quantitative aggregate: interchangeable instances of a category, like envelopes or students. *Do* (တို့) marks an associative plural: a group of diverse entities bound to a focal individual (Okell & Allott 2001). ‘U Thet Tun-*do*’ means not ‘many U Thet Tuns’ but ‘U Thet Tun and his associates.’ *Nga-do* (‘we’) therefore means ‘I and my group,’ not ‘we together as equals.’ The collective exists in orbit around the speaker. When Bamar protesters chant *do ayei*, the grammar positions them at the centre of the association, with ethnic nationalities as satellites. This is the linguistic structure that ethnic critics hear as ‘Bamar mob.’ The Tipitaka Myanma Abhidan makes the ego-centring explicit: in glossing *atta-ditthi* (self-view), it equates the pronoun *nga* with *atta* (self/soul) (Tipitaka Myanma Abhidan, vol. 8: 6). The *do* of *do ayei* radiates outward from that self.

Yet *dwei* would be worse. *Bama-dwei* would mean ‘a pile of Burmans,’ stripping the collective of agency and connection. *Do* at least preserves the grammar of association: diverse parties bound together, which is what a federal compact requires. The challenge is to use the associative power of *do* while neutralizing its ego-radiating structure. This mirrors the political challenge precisely: how to build a union where the Bamar majority is not the gravitational centre. No Burmese pronoun escapes this trap. Unlike Tamil or Malay, Burmese does not distinguish inclusive ‘we’ (you and I together) from exclusive ‘we’ (my

group, not yours). To say 'we,' one must choose between *nga-do* (I and my group) and *kya-naw-do*. Both anchor the collective in the singular self, as master or as bondsman. The absence is not of horizontal vocabulary but of grammatical machinery for constituting a collective political agent.

The trap is not only vertical but identity-bound. When a Bamar protester chants *nga-do*, the 'we' radiates from a Bamar self and constitutes a Bamar collective. But a Karen *nga-do* radiates from a Karen self just as surely. A Chin *nga-do* from a Chin self. The grammar does not privilege Bamar identity specifically; it privileges identity as such, because every collective must be anchored in a particular speaker whose social coordinates determine who belongs. English 'we' can be filled by context alone: 'we who sign this document,' 'we who agree to these terms.' The referent is determined by the act of agreement, not by who the speaker is. Burmese *do* cannot do this. Its referent is always the speaker and those associated with the speaker, which in political contexts defaults to those who share the speaker's ethnic, religious, or kinship identity. A civic 'we' whose membership is determined by compact rather than by birth or belief has no grammatical home in the pronoun system. This is why the ethnic nationality organisations' suspicion of *do ayei* is not paranoia but linguistic perception: they hear the grammar doing what it does, constituting a collective around an identity rather than around an agreement.

The hidden *nga* deepens the trap. Because the 'I' at the centre of *do* is implied but never stated, the collective never has to confront the question of who that 'I' is. In speech, Bamar protesters can assume the 'I' is Bamar without saying so. But a written compact would need to name its parties. And the literary register that writing activates supplies only the slave-I, *kyanaw*, which names no identity at all and submits to every authority. The drafter faces a choice between a hidden equal who cannot sign and a visible slave who cannot bind. And it is why *sagyok*, not pronoun reform, is structurally necessary. The pronoun cannot constitute a cross-ethnic political subject. Only the documentary act can.

This semantic openness permits appropriation: the first actor to provide systematic content captures the term's political meaning. The vulnerability follows from a gap between expression and articulation. When the chant *do ayei* echoes through streets, it declares that this cause is ours; it does not define what 'ours' means or who is included. The oral form is not a preference but a condition: *do ayei* is the political speech act available to a community that has been systematically excluded from inscription. The regime that controls the archive has closed the page; the chant is what horizontal political speech looks like when writing is denied. That the word *aye* means both cause and inscription is not incidental — the community chanting *do ayei* knows precisely what it needs and is naming the deprivation in the same breath as the demand.

The *sagyok* does not manufacture a unified 'Do' out of diverse populations; it coordinates their irreducible differences. It establishes conditions under which distinct communities can invoke their different understandings of 'ours,' whether grounded in Buddhist dhamma, Christian covenant, or ancestral land stewardship, without that difference collapsing into either assimilation or fragmentation. Each signatory retains standing to interpret the compact's terms; none claims final authority over its meaning. The *sagyok* accomplishes through documentary act what the pronoun system structurally prevents: it

constitutes a collective political subject that is not the projection of any individual self. Whether the resistance succeeds in stripping the 'Burman-ness' out of *do* to make it a genuinely civic 'We,' remains the central political question.

Arendt (1963: 29-32) distinguished liberation from freedom: throwing off the oppressor is not the same as constituting a new public realm. Most revolutions achieve the first but fail at the second. The 1988 *do ayei* was liberation without foundation. In the terms developed here, it was individual revolution without group constitution. Individual *sadan* emerged, all from the Bamar centre: Aung Gyi's open letters to Ne Win, Suu Kyi's Shwedagon speech articulating democratic principles, the General Strike Committee's ultimatum demanding transfer of power. Each was an act of individual witness. None constituted a collective political subject. No document was co-signed across ethnic lines. No framework for shared governance crystallized from the chanting. The military filled the void precisely because these *sadan* remained isolated acts of witness rather than a *sagyok* that bound diverse communities into mutual promise.

Writing *do ayei*

In February 2026, approximately twenty people gathered in a Thai-Myanmar border town for a one-day workshop titled '*Seizing the Moment: Writing Do Ayei*.' The participants worked across the refugee support infrastructure that has developed along the Thai-Myanmar border since the 2021 coup: relief channel operators who coordinate resource distribution, safe house workers who shelter those fleeing military violence, media workers who broadcast into Myanmar, and teachers at an independent education collective operating beyond government control. Most were CDM participants. Others included former political prisoners and students. By afternoon the group had settled to around eighteen. The workshop was structured in three stages: participants first identified principles already operating within their own horizontal practices, then sought commonalities across groups, and finally attempted to compose compact sentences collectively in Burmese. They had been invited to attempt something that the preceding analysis suggests is structurally difficult: to compose, collectively and in Burmese, sentences that might begin a horizontal political compact.

The workshop drew on the analytical framework developed in [Writing Horizontal Compacts](#), which provided the categories participants used to examine their own language: the pronoun hierarchy, the giving-verb spectrum, the genre-word typology, and the drafter's checklist that organizes these into practical questions. The guide's categories were not imposed as a lecture but offered as diagnostic tools. When participants identified *kyun-nok* as what they took to be a horizontal pronoun they were working with the same vocabulary the guide had mapped across the documentary record. What the workshop added was something the guide could not supply: the lived encounter between analytical framework and collective practice.

The workshop divided into four groups organized around their areas of work. Each was asked to identify principles already operating within their practice. What they described was striking in its consistency. The relief operators identified reciprocal resource-sharing as foundational: volunteers distribute what the community provides, and decisions about priority are made collectively by assessing vulnerability. The safe house group reported

that diversity posed no difficulty within their walls; everyone takes responsibility, and rules are agreed by those who seek shelter. The media group wrestled with the tension between reaching audiences and maintaining ethical standards, insisting that broadcasting must represent grassroots voices rather than institutional interests. The education collective articulated the most explicit structural argument: when governments fall, hierarchies also fall, and authority between teachers and students becomes horizontal, grounded in trust and mutual respect rather than credentials or rank. 'Positions are no longer there,' they reported. Trust comes from 'the belief that they are a part of a collective movement together.'

The common vocabulary that emerged across all four groups was relational rather than procedural. Participants identified trust built through shared suffering, reciprocity as the mechanism that creates a collective 'we,' adaptability as a survival practice that simultaneously generates social bonds, and the 'absurdity' of life on the border as something that can only be understood through lived experience rather than learned from texts. These descriptions capture the solidarity of shared practice. Translating that solidarity into durable institutional form is a different task, and one the afternoon session would test.

The afternoon session tested whether those principles could be inscribed. Participants were asked what a *sagyok* (စာချုပ်, compact) might sound like. The group first discussed pronouns, identifying *kyunok* (ကျွန်ုပ်), *kyanaw* (ကျနော်), and *kyama* (ကျမ) as horizontal and gender-inclusive alternatives to the hierarchical pronoun system analysed above. The dictionary evidence, however, qualifies the assessment. *Kyunok* drops the royal suffix (-*taw*) but retains the servitude root (*kyun*); what the participants identified was a less vertical term, not a horizontal one. The distinction matters: refusing deference is not the same as constructing equality. The pronoun conversation showed participants working in real time on exactly the linguistic innovation the four-term analysis predicts is necessary: finding forms of address that escape the vertical loop encoded in ordinary Burmese speech.

Template sentences were then offered in English with deliberate blanks, designed to invite specific commitments: 'We, who have worked across community lines since 2021, have witnessed that ____.' 'Because we have seen ____, we hold that ____.' 'No single community among us claims precedence in this. We learned it together.' 'We commit to ____, not because any authority compels us, but because our shared experience requires it.' 'We ask those who read this to test it against their own experience. Where it fails that test, it must be rewritten.' The principle underlying these templates is that authority in a horizontal compact derives from witness, not rank. The grammar is 'we have seen,' not 'it shall be.' Abstract universal claims assert a principle from nowhere in particular, with no named witness and no specified obligation. A compact that opens with 'all people have inherent dignity' has conceded the argumentative ground to whoever controls enforcement. Witnessed experience is different. It names who saw what, when, and under what conditions, creating commitments specific enough to be honoured or violated.

The group collectively produced three sentences in Burmese. The first: ၂၀၂၁ ခုနှစ်မှစ၍ လူမှုအသိုင်းအဝိုင်းပေါင်းစုံအကြားလက်တွဲဆောင်ရွက်ခဲ့ကြတဲ့ ကျွန်ုပ်တို့ဟာ ပုဂ္ဂလရေးချယ်မှုဖြင့် ခေတ်ဝန်ကို မေတ္တာ။ ကရုဏာ။ ကိုယ်ချင်းစာစိတ်များဖြင့် ကိုယ်စွမ်းဥဏ်စွမ်းရှိသူမျှ

မျှဝေထမ်းဆောင်ခဲ့ကြပါတယ်၍ ('We who have worked hand in hand across diverse communities since 2021 have, through personal choice, shared and served the burden of our time with *metta*, *karuna*, and empathy, to the best of our ability.') The second: ဓမ္မအကျိုးကိုမျှော်ကိုး၍ ကျွန်ုပ်တို့ ယုံကြည်ပါတယ်၍ ('Hoping for the benefit of *dhamma*, we believe we can walk together hand in hand with integrity to the journey's end.') The third: ကျွန်ုပ်တို့သည် လျှောက်လှမ်းရာတွင် မည်သည့် ပယောဂကြောင့်မှ ယိမ်းယိုင်သွေဖီသွားခြင်းမရှိဘဲ သာတညီမျှထမ်းပိုးလိုက် အပြန်အလှန်သင်ယူရင်း ဆက်လက်ဆောင်ရွက်သွားပါမည်ဟု ကျွန်ုပ်တို့ ကတိပြုပါတယ်၍ ('We pledge that in walking toward this goal, without wavering or deviating from any cause, we will continue to bear the burden equally and learn from each other reciprocally.')

The third sentence is particularly revealing. Its vocabulary enacts the very tension the linguistic analysis predicts. *Apyan ahlan* ('reciprocally') carries the reactive reciprocity of exchange and retaliation rather than the stable mutuality a compact requires. *Thatunyimya htanbo lyet* ('bear the burden equally') uses the burden vocabulary (*htanbo*, to shoulder a load) that recurs through the vertical register: the same *wun-khan* (burden-acceptance) that dictionaries attach to *patinyan*. Participants composing horizontal text reached for the most horizontal terms available and found them structurally compromised. Their instinctive turn toward *metta*, *karuna*, and *dhamma* may reflect something deeper than Buddhist habit. If every available term for mutual obligation encodes debt, burden, or retaliation, then grounding a compact in the *brahma vihara* (the four sublime states: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity) may be the nearest available escape from the vertical loop. The *brahma vihara* are structurally non-transactional: they flow outward without creating debt, require no recipient, and position no party as above or below. They are not horizontal in the sense of mutual obligation between named parties, but they are the one register in Burmese political-moral vocabulary that escapes the vertical default. This may explain why *metta* and *dhamma* recur so persistently in Myanmar's political language: not as vague Buddhist sentiment but as the only available vocabulary that does not position the speaker as either patron or petitioner.

The pull toward *brahma vihara* vocabulary reflects a deeper structural condition. The Pali term for these qualities is *appamañña*, literally 'without measure.' The *Subha Sutta* instructs practitioners to suffuse the world in all directions with benevolence, 'completely, with a boundless mind.' Narrowing *metta* to a specific obligation between named parties is not merely difficult but doctrinally alien to the practice. More fundamentally, Theravada Buddhism historically declined jurisdiction over the mutual obligations that bind lay people to one another. Lifecycle ceremonies that bind individuals to community – naming, marriage, consecration – were historically Brahmanic business, performed by *ponna*, not the Sangha. Marriage is auspicious (*loki mangala*) but not sacramental; the monk blesses but does not officiate. Christianity gave Western constitutionalism the covenant: a binding agreement witnessed by transcendent authority. Theravada Buddhism offered no equivalent. The *brahma vihara* may be the nearest escape precisely because they are non-binding -- but a *sagyok* requires what they cannot supply. That escape is itself compromised: under the BSPP, *byamazo taya* (social meditation grounded in the *brahma vihara*) became the ideological vocabulary of Burmese socialism, a state project of boundless fellow-feeling that substituted for the specific mutual obligations it was used to

dissolve. When participants reached for *metta* and *karuna*, they reached into vocabulary the authoritarian state had already occupied.

Despite this co-option, *metta*, *karuna*, and *cetana* do in fact travel across religious boundaries: they function as Burmese translation equivalents for overlapping concepts in Christian, Muslim, and animist traditions, and communities across Myanmar's ethnic and religious landscape draw on them as shared moral vocabulary. The limitation is not cultural legibility but the structure of the obligation they encode. A related trap is *cetana* (good intention). Since 1962, every military regime has demanded that citizens trust its *cetana*; forced labourers were called *cetana shin*, 'masters of good intention.' A *sagyok* does not ask parties to trust each other's intentions. It asks them to bind themselves to specific terms.

The 1948 Burmese translation of the Universal Declaration demonstrates the capture at a specific textual moment. Article 1's 'should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood' becomes a call to place *metta* towards one another (*achingyìn*). The English 'brotherhood,' a secular Enlightenment concept of reciprocal fraternity, enters Burmese as boundless Buddhist loving-kindness owed to all sentient beings. The translators reached for both *metta* and the reciprocity particle *achingyìn*, and the two sit uneasily in the same clause: *metta* is boundless and non-selective, *achingyìn* specifies mutual action between particular parties. The tension in one clause is the chant-to-compact gap in miniature. The horizontal particle was available. It arrived wrapped in a vertical cosmology.

The sentences were moving, and they were revealing. The pronoun problem was being addressed: *kyunok-do* replaced the gendered, hierarchical alternatives. The content of the compact, however, grounded its authority in *metta*, *karuna*, and *dhamma* rather than in the act of mutual agreement itself. This was not a failure of imagination. In a language where the written word defaults to sovereign command, appealing to Buddhist moral coordinates may be the most available strategy for grounding a document's authority in something other than the signatories' own power. The English templates had asked for specific commitments: what have you witnessed, what do you hold, what do you commit to. The Burmese versions answered with moral disposition, the spirit of solidarity, rather than with the mutual obligations that would give solidarity institutional form. The American Declaration of Independence illustrates a different strategy: 'we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.' That sentence appeals to no cosmic authority. Its force derives entirely from the lateral act of pledging, signatories binding themselves to one another. Whether Burmese can sustain that lateral register in written form is the question the remainder of this article addresses — first through further ethnographic evidence from the CDM, then through the grammar analysis that explains why the difficulty is structural rather than incidental.

CDM discourse and its limits

A student at the workshop articulated what the linguistic and ethnographic evidence converges upon. 'We Myanmar,' he said, 'have never had the opportunity to say "We."' The remark is not about vocabulary, and it requires precision: the problem is not Myanmar-wide but specific to the Bamar centre. Burmese has pronouns, collective markers, and terms for solidarity. The problem is that the political conditions for horizontal self-

constitution have never been sustained long enough for the language to develop and practise the documentary vocabulary such conditions require. Every generation that attempted to say 'we' as equals had the attempt captured before it could be inscribed. The Dobama nationalists voiced [*nga-*]*do* in the 1930s; within two decades the parliamentary state had collapsed and military rule had begun. The 1988 generation chanted *do ayei*; within two years the junta had converted it into *do tawun ayei thon ba*, 'our three main national causes,' an instrument of command.

The following day produced two independent acts of analysis, each extending what the workshop had left unresolved. I met separately with a participant who had a background in law. She had been present at the workshop and had been thinking overnight about what the three sentences lacked. Her suggestion was a title: *gadi sagyok* (ကတိစာချုပ်), a solemnly but voluntarily promised compact. The title named the binding act that the content would need to perform. On the same day, K, a CDM participant writing under pseudonym, compiled an inventory of political expressions circulating within the resistance. Her compilation constitutes an independent act of vernacular speech-act analysis performed from inside the movement, covering twelve phrases broken down by linguistic structure, semantic meaning, pragmatic usage, and political significance. The two contributions – a genre name and a vocabulary audit – approached the same problem from opposite directions: one named what the document should become, the other mapped what the movement's existing language could and could not say.

For the CDM, the solidarity expressions centre on collective identity and mutual reliance. *Ngado hma nga-do be shi de* (ငါတို့မှာ ငါတို့ပဲရှိတယ်, 'we only have each other') doubles the collective pronoun and adds the emphasis particle *be* (ပဲ, 'only'), producing a grammar of absolute mutual dependence. K reads it as the moment the movement abandons expectation from the state and relies solely on internal bonds. The companion expression *pwe pyi hma bauk-cha sok hma* (ပွဲပြီးမှ ဘောက်ချာစုတ်မှာ, 'we will collect the voucher after the show') defers personal benefit until the collective task is complete. K notes this has become an internal norm within the movement. The norm exists through repeated utterance. Nobody has written it down.

The movement's moral vocabulary reveals where its legitimacy claims point. K documents the expression *akyaung akyo, akaung ahso, dhamma ne ahdamma* (အကြောင်းအကျိုး၊ အကောင်းအဆိုး၊ ဓမ္မနဲ့ အဓမ္မ, 'cause and effect, good and bad, *dhamma* and *adhamma*'). Three paired oppositions ascend from causal through evaluative to cosmological. When participants justify their position, they appeal to *dhamma*, to the distinction between righteous and unrighteous that structures Buddhist ethical reasoning. They do not appeal to a compact among equals. This echoes the workshop's Burmese sentences, which grounded their authority in *metta*, *karuna*, and *dhamma* rather than in the act of mutual agreement. The movement's default legitimacy claim, whether in composed compact language or in circulating slogan, orients upward toward transcendent moral order rather than outward toward horizontal reciprocal commitment.

The most striking feature of K's inventory is how much of it is devoted to self-critique. Five of the twelve expressions name the reproduction of vertical power within the resistance itself. *Peidayu, hkaing da lok, pyan ma mei ne* (ပေးတာယူ၊ ခိုင်းတာလုပ်၊ ပြန်မမေးနဲ့, 'take what

is given, do what is ordered, do not ask back') names what K calls 'command culture' and identifies it as displacing horizontal deliberation. *Palin baw hkwei tek lei gyin* (ပုလ္လင်ပေါ်ခွေးတက်လေခြင်း, 'a dog ascending the throne') deploys the royal throne as satirical metaphor: someone within the movement gains power and begins behaving like the sovereign the revolution was supposed to abolish. *CDM-pya hsan taung* (CDM ပြ ဆန်တောင်း, 'show CDM, beg for rice') adapts an older proverb to describe those who perform revolutionary credentials while extracting private benefit. K identifies this as 'performative resistance.' The satirical vocabulary is precise and unsparing. The movement knows exactly what is going wrong inside its own structures.

K's inventory is diagnostic, not constructive. It does not contain a single expression describing what a horizontal agreement would look like, how collective decisions should be reached, or what mutual obligations members owe each other. The diagnostic vocabulary is rich. The constructive vocabulary is absent. The movement can say 'this is ours' and 'do not boss people around.' It cannot yet say 'here is what we have agreed to hold each other to.'

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights begins with transcendent moral claims, 'the inherent dignity' and 'equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family,' but then specifies thirty articles of mutual obligation. The CDM's vocabulary has produced the preamble. The articles remain unwritten. The *sagyok* is the missing form – or rather, the missing practice. The ethnic nationality organisations at Manerplaw, Mae Tha Raw Hta, and Thoo Mweh Klo reached for *thabawtunyigyek* (သဘောတူညီချက်, consensus agreement between equals) precisely because it carried none of *sagyok*'s vertical weight. That vocabulary exists in the documentary record. It has not migrated to the centre.

The workshop confirmed in real time what the preceding linguistic and documentary analysis had established: horizontal speech becomes vertical text at the moment of inscription. The shift did not occur between speaking and writing as separate acts. It occurred during formulation: when participants composed sentences aloud with the aim of writing them down, the anticipation of inscription pulled the register upward. The four groups described their working principles in conversation with fluency and precision. Reciprocity, shared responsibility, trust, adaptability: these concepts circulated orally without difficulty. But when the same participants sat down to write compact sentences in Burmese, the register shifted. The colloquial *nga-do* that works in chanted solidarity gave way to the formal *kyunok-do*, better suited to inscription. The transition from voice to text pulled the language upward, toward the register of sovereign pronouncement rather than mutual agreement.

This confirmed something deep about Burmese political literacy that the documentary record had already shown. Written political documents in Myanmar have historically been instruments of sovereign power: royal edicts, *sadan* composed by those authorized to witness, *ayeidawbon* commissioned by victorious kings, constitutional texts imposed by military councils. The written word commands. The law student's instinct about naming confirmed this at the level of genre: *sagyok* by itself sounds like what governments do, and participants risked feeling they were trespassing on sovereign territory simply by attempting to write one. Her solution, *gadi sagyok*, relocated authority from station to commitment. She did at the level of genre-word what this article argues would need to be

done at every level of the text: assembled horizontality from compromised components, pairing the binding force of *sagyok* with the voluntary commitment of *gadi* to produce a compound that neither word supplies alone.

The enforcement was not merely historical inheritance. In the early 1960s the Upper Burma Writers' Association proposed replacing the literary style with colloquial Burmese in all written contexts, publishing books and theses in colloquial form. Ne Win's regime suppressed the movement. This was not content censorship, which controls what may be said. It was register enforcement, which controls how the state may be addressed. The distinction matters. A regime that enforces the literary register does not need to ban horizontal content. It needs only to maintain the register in which horizontal content becomes structurally difficult to formulate. Every clause ending in the literary particle *thi* sounds like a pronouncement transmitted downward, regardless of what it says. The colloquial movement's suppression guaranteed that political writing would continue to activate the vertical register the court had claimed centuries earlier.

The chant *do ayei* escapes sovereign association precisely because nobody authored it, everyone voices it, and it exists only in the present tense of collective performance. To write it down is to risk transforming a horizontal act of shared ownership into a vertical act of textual authority. The participants' instinctive turn toward Buddhist moral vocabulary when writing may have been an attempt to ground the text in something higher than any individual signatory, thereby preventing the document itself from becoming a new instrument of hierarchy. The Burmese vertical loop, it turns out, operates not only in pronouns, honorifics, and verbs of giving and receiving. It operates in document types themselves.

K's vocabulary inventory confirms this from another angle. The movement's diagnostic expressions, its satirical naming of command culture, throne-ascending dogs, and performative resistance, circulate orally. They are spoken judgments, proverbs, social media phrases. They work because they are collective, repeatable, and unattributed. Writing a constructive counterpart would require a different speech act: not judgment from a moral position but commitment that binds the speaker alongside others. The shift from 'do not boss people around' to 'here is how we will make decisions together' is a shift from critique to compact, from describing what should not be to inscribing what will be. That inscriptive act is what the *aye*i in *do ayei* promises but has not yet delivered. The chant fuses cause and inscription in the moment of utterance. Separating them, fixing the inscription as durable text while preserving the horizontal character of the cause, is the structural challenge this essay has been tracing.

The workshop and K's inventory together suggest it is not a challenge that can be solved by finding better words. It requires finding a different relationship between the written document and the community that produces it, one in which the text derives its authority from the signatories' mutual commitment rather than from alignment with any source, cosmological or sovereign, that stands above them.

Each time, the vertical apparatus recaptured the collective pronoun before it could become binding text. The ethnic nationalities, by contrast, have had that opportunity: their positions outside successive sovereign centres gave them the political space in which

horizontal documentary traditions could develop and be practised across generations. The Bamar centre, under monarchy, colonial administration, and military rule, never has. What the border areas have provided since 2021 may be the first sustained period in which Bamar political actors have practised horizontality long enough for a documentary language to begin forming. The *kyunok-do* pronoun, the *gadi sagyok* title, the workshop's attempt itself: these are early signs. But they are forming against the weight of a political history in which every previous attempt was terminated before the words could settle into text.

Sadan, sagyok, and their stakes

The workshop and CDM evidence have shown the problem in practice. The distinction between *sadan* and *sagyok* now carries practical weight. The stakes can be stated precisely.

The authority of these documents is political, not epistemic. It derives not from the objective truth of their content but from the act of mutual promising they record. Arendt (1963: 193) warned that appeals to self-evident truth in political founding 'coerce and disempower,' substituting isolated acquiescence for free coming together. The *sadan* examined here carry authority because they document a performative political act: the constitution of a shared realm through mutual agreement. The legitimacy lies in the 'We hold,' not in what is held.

To document is not to foreclose disagreement but to establish the terms on which it proceeds. A revolutionary *sadan* functions as protocol rather than verdict. Where *kyei nya gyet* declares closure, *sadan* creates conditions for perpetual re-opening. What transforms *sadan* into living compact is not the finality of its drafting but the continuity of its contestation. If a *sadan* is imposed, it ceases to be a *sadan* and becomes merely another decree. Without ratification, a *sadan* remains a thesis — a claim awaiting the co-signatures that would make it binding.

This is where the *do ayei* chant and the *sagyok* converge. The 'we' that *do ayei* asserts — collective, undivided, belonging to no single commander — does not pre-exist the compact that would inscribe it. It comes into being through the act of mutual declaration. A community that agrees, signs, and speaks together in that agreement has constituted itself as a political subject; one that chants without signing remains a crowd. The *sagyok* is not the record of a 'we' that already exists. It is the act through which that 'we' becomes real.

The linguistic trap

The grammar of Burmese explains why the difficulty is structural, not incidental. The features that make horizontal speech so difficult to inscribe are not surface habits that careful drafting can override; they are built into the language's architecture at every level simultaneously. The standard vocabulary for reciprocity defaults to turn-taking, retaliation, or same-category solidarity rather than the status-neutral mutual obligation a federal compact requires. Even *do*, the possessive pronoun of the resistance chant, constructs a collective that radiates outward from the speaker's ego rather than a gathering of equals. Writing a horizontal compact in Burmese demands grammatical labour that English or French obscures: the horizontality must be assembled from marginal resources because

the default structures will not supply it. The resources that resist vertical capture are not nouns or pronouns but grammatical particles — markers of plural action and coordinate conjunction — which operate on the verb rather than encoding status in the noun. This is not a Whorfian claim. Burmese speakers conceive of horizontal relations readily — the border-town workshop demonstrated as much. The claim is narrower: that every written pronoun enacts hierarchy regardless of the drafter's intent, and that undoing what the pronoun does requires deliberate grammatical construction at other levels of the sentence.

Every founding declaration confronts what Derrida (1986) identified as the paradox of self-constitution: the people in whose name the document speaks do not exist as a political subject before the declaration brings them into being. The signatories of the American Declaration spoke for 'the good people of these colonies,' yet those good people became a people only through the act of signing. This paradox is universal. But in languages whose grammar encodes hierarchy, the founding act carries additional weight. A Burmese *do ayei* must accomplish what every declaration must — constituting its own authority without prior authorization — while simultaneously establishing horizontal standing among parties whose every pronoun positions them as above or below one another. English 'We the People' grammatically constitutes a group subject; Burmese *kyundaw-do* dissolves the group back into an individual and his associates. The resistance's adoption of *[nga-]do* addresses this at the level of the pronoun, but the verb system, the address system, and the literary register reassert hierarchy at every subsequent level of the sentence.

The performative labour is not merely doubled. Derrida's paradox has a hidden precondition he never examined: that the language of the declaration is capable of carrying a horizontal collective pronoun. French *nous* was available as a vessel for the people the declaration would bring into being. The grammar was ready for the subject it would constitute. The question was only whether anyone had the right to invoke it. Burmese presents the case Derrida did not anticipate: a language where the declaration cannot constitute a horizontal 'we' because the language has no horizontal 'we' to constitute. The 'we' that a Burmese declaration brings into being is necessarily either *kyanawdo* (a slave-we that submits to every authority) or *do* (an ego-radiating we whose hidden *nga* cannot be inscribed). The declaration does not fail to bring 'the people' into being. It succeeds. But what it brings into being is a vertical collective: subjects rather than citizens, associates of a focal ego rather than co-signatories to a compact. When the language can carry a horizontal 'we,' Derrida's paradox is political: who authorized the signer? When it cannot, the paradox becomes material: what did the declaration actually constitute?

The FDC inherited the Dobama pronoun but not its ambition. The verb system, the address conventions, and the literary register that carries legal authority remain unresolved. The FDC's preamble deploys *Do* (confirmed below), but Part I's operative clauses use *kyanawdo* throughout — the servile plural the Dobama nationalists replaced with *[nga-]do* — reverting to the tributary I at the moment the document claims to speak for the people. Its obligation clauses use *pyin-pyan* (duty-acceptance) and *wun-khan* (burden-shouldering), the downward-flowing grammar of command disguised as commitment. The literary sentence-final particles that mark sovereign pronouncement appear throughout, so the document sounds, at the register level, less like mutual agreement than like charter issued

from above. The Dobama corrected the pronoun. The grammar — verbs, particles, register — was not.¹³

The reversion is structurally inevitable, not a drafting failure. The Dobama pronoun hid *nga* inside *do*: the horizontal 'I' was implied but never stated, because stating it would be transgressive. That concealment worked for chanting, where the collective voice absorbs the rudeness of any individual *nga*. It cannot work for legal binding. A compact requires an 'I' that stands behind its signature. The hidden 'I' of *do* cannot sign anything. The moment the drafter reaches for a written first person, the literary register supplies only *kyanawdo*: 'we, your royal slaves.' The FDC's preamble holds *do* because a preamble is essentially a declaration, a written chant. The operative clauses, where binding language must function as law, revert to the slave pronoun because no other written first person exists. You cannot sign a compact as equals when your signature literally says 'your royal slave.' The catch-22 is complete: the one pronoun that encodes equality is the one pronoun that cannot be written.

The companion guide, *Writing Horizontal Compacts*, documents this difficulty across five reinforcing linguistic layers (built on the speech-level foundation that requires status assessment before any utterance): the pronominal system (Sections 1 and 4), the giving and receiving verbs that encode directional hierarchy (Section 2), the literary register whose sentence-final particles carry the tone of sovereign pronouncement (Section 3), the political-moral vocabulary and cultural mechanisms that dissolve contractual obligation into sentiment (Sections 8–11), and the vocabulary for naming the people, which converts treaty partners into classified subjects (Section 6). These five layers rest on a deeper institutional condition: Theravada Buddhism's systematic withdrawal from sacralizing lay mutual obligation, which left compact-drafters without authoritative vocabulary for bilateral commitment and pushed political language toward the Buddhist universals that dissolve specific commitments into boundless compassion (Sections 8–11).

Brown and Gilman (1960) demonstrated that pronoun systems encode power and solidarity, but asked the question only of European languages where a shift to reciprocal address was already underway. Errington (1998) showed how Javanese speakers produce a sense of interactional flatness in Indonesian by avoiding its full pronominal range — flattening against Javanese speech levels — but treated this as a sociolinguistic practice rather than examining whether a language's grammar could structurally obstruct compact-making. Anderson (1983) argued that print-vernaculars created the 'deep, horizontal comradeship' of national belonging, yet assumed the vernacular itself was available for the purpose. Burmese presents the case Anderson's framework does not anticipate: a print-vernacular whose grammar resists the horizontal comradeship print is supposed to enable. Anderson assumed that the medium — mass-produced, standardised text circulating among anonymous readers — would do the political work of levelling. It does not, when the language the medium carries encodes hierarchy in its grammatical structure rather

¹³ The intersection of linguistic typology and constitutional design has received little scholarly attention. The choice of *ayei*, *sagyok*, and *kyeinyagyek* as analytical focal points requires no prior discovery procedure; what matters is whether they yield insights recognised by those familiar with the documentary traditions (Wierzbicka 1997: 16).

than in the social context of utterance. The horizontal comradeship has to be built into the text itself, word by word, particle by particle — which is precisely the labour the drafting tradition this article analyses must address.¹⁴

The Brown-Gilman framework fails for Burmese because it assumes politeness is a strategic choice layered onto a neutral grammatical base: speakers toggle between *tu* and *vous* depending on context, but the grammar supplies an unmarked option for contexts where status is irrelevant. Ide (1989) identified a fundamentally different system operating in Japanese and, by extension, in other speech-level languages: *wakimae*, or discernment, in which the speaker has no unmarked option and must assess relative status before producing any utterance at all. Müller & Weymuth (2017: 414–416) show that Burmese operates precisely this way: the hierarchical pronoun system forces the speaker to choose from pronouns encoding social status, while the inherited neutral forms are 'now used merely in intimate situations and are considered rude when used with people of higher status,' leaving no status-neutral default. The distinction matters for constitutional theory. In a *wakimae* system, political speech cannot begin without a prior settlement of who stands above whom. Every pronoun choice in a Burmese compact actively constitutes hierarchy in the moment of utterance; it does not merely reflect a pre-existing relationship but performs and reinstates it each time the document is read (Silverstein 2003).

The linguistic problem is also a constitutional one. Constitutional scholars distinguish three modal types: authoritarian command (a centre imposes a framework on its parts), aspirational principle (a document articulates values without binding mechanism), and coming-together federalism in which previously separate units voluntarily pool sovereignty for defined purposes (Breen 2018; Williams 2014). The distinction matters because holding-together federations — where a centre grants devolution downward — can function with vertical grammar: the grammar of giving matches the structure of the arrangement. Coming-together compacts require something different: language that enacts mutual commitment between co-equals before any centre exists to validate them. The Burmese linguistic problem is precisely a coming-together problem. It is not merely that Myanmar's political vocabulary reflects past centralisation; it is that the grammar

¹⁴ The obstruction is not hypothetical. Müller and Weymuth (2017) document hierarchical pronoun systems across the Greater Burma Zone, showing that Burmese, Thai, and Vietnamese encode relative social status in an open class of personal pronouns. Poedjosoedarmo (1968) found Javanese speech levels were perceived as strengthening class barriers. When Thailand's People's Party drafted its anti-monarchy leaflet, the author struggled to write without honorific language even when aiming for egalitarianism; the register pulled him back (Chantornvong 1992). Indonesia's 1928 Youth Pledge chose Malay over Javanese precisely because Malay's absence of status markers supported egalitarian address (Keane 2003; Anderson 1990). Indonesian nationalists solved the hierarchical register problem through wholesale linguistic substitution. Myanmar's resistance cannot do this: Burmese is the shared language of coordination across ethnic lines, and no statusless alternative stands ready. What Indonesia achieved by switching languages, Myanmar would need to achieve by rewriting grammar from within.

structurally resists the specific documentary act that coming-together federalism requires.¹⁵

Western federalism theory has distinguished the originating compact from the resulting constitution. Elazar (1987) traced federalism to the Latin *foedus* (covenant) and argued that a covenant involves a moral commitment beyond mutual advantage: the parties bind themselves to one another, not merely to an exchange. Riker (1964) defined federalism as a bargain between prospective national leaders and constituent officials; if the bargain fails, the constitution becomes a legal fiction. Both treat the distinction as political, not linguistic or documentary. They assume the language of compact is available and ask whether the political will exists. Myanmar inverts this assumption. The CDM generated the political will, but the documentary form required to inscribe horizontal obligation between self-constituting communities remains to be constructed.

The companion guide, [Writing Horizontal Compacts](#), provides the documentary analysis and practical tools that translate this argument into drafting decisions: a vocabulary inventory, a scoring framework, and a checklist drafters can apply to any *sagyok* in progress.

The centre chants, the periphery documents

That construction has been uneven. Its unevenness has a geographical dimension that Western federalism theory did not anticipate: the documentary gap runs not between states and their citizens but between the Bamar centre and the ethnic periphery, and it runs in the direction that James Scott's Zomia thesis would least expect. Scott assigned documentary literacy to the lowland *mandala* state and oral fluidity to the highland periphery. Myanmar's post-coup political landscape inverts this. The Bamar centre mobilises through chant, slogan, and manifesto; the ethnic periphery reaches for constitutions, land registries, and taxation law. The documentary gap runs along an ethnic line, and it is not recent.

Ethnic nationalities have maintained sophisticated written constitutions, federal proposals, and legal frameworks continuously since 1947. The Karen National Union's constitutional documents, the Chin National Front's ratified constitution, and the Kachin Independence Organization's administrative regulations demonstrate documentary traditions that never ceased. As Mandy Sadan has detailed, the KIO has for decades functioned as a sophisticated administrative state, issuing regulations, collecting taxes, running schools and hospitals, and binding populations through bureaucratic documentation (Sadan 2013: 289-312). The Kachin hills were never directly administered under British rule, and the KIO did not await the *do ayei* revolution to discover the power of *sadan*; it has been administering territory through written instruments for over sixty years. The current proliferation of charters represents less a universal awakening to documentation than a convergence: the Bamar

¹⁵ On 'military-state' constitutionalism and the 2008 Constitution as an instrument of entrenchment rather than limitation, see Crouch (2019) and Harding 2017. On the distinction between 'holding-together' and 'coming-together' federalism, see Breen (2018) and Williams (2014).

centre finally adopting state-building practices that the ethnic peripheries long ago mastered. This diverges from the pattern Lieberman (2003) identified in the cycles of political collapse and reconsolidation that mainland Southeast Asian history records, where documentary continuity attached to the new centre rather than the periphery, and where new centres absorbed or suppressed horizontal arrangements forged during the interstitial period.

The centre of the Bamar opposition risks being out-documented by its allies. While it relies on the Federal Democracy Charter and the chant of *do ayei*, the ethnic periphery is rapidly generating documentary authority of its own. The TNLA is drafting a constitution for Ta'ang State, converting territorial control into documented statehood. The KNU's land policy operates not merely as administrative convenience but as performed sovereignty: a peasant holding a KNU land title becomes a legal subject of Kawthoolei in ways that receiving medical treatment alone cannot achieve (South 2021; Thawngmung & South 2025). The Arakan Army, having established a judiciary and enacted taxation law under the banner of the 'Way of Rakhita' (*Rakhita Maggin*), is papering its state into existence through the accumulation of court judgments and tax receipts (Thawngmung & South 2025). These are systematic efforts to convert *ana* (coercive capacity) into *awza* (legitimate authority) through documentation. If the TNLA possesses a constitution while the NUG possesses only a manifesto, political gravity shifts toward the periphery in legal as well as military terms.

Since 2021, state constitutions have begun codifying the transition from *sadan* to *sagyok*. The pace has surprised observers who expected constitutional capacity to flow from the centre outward. The Karenni State Interim Arrangement (January 2023, revised October 2024) establishes a multi-level governance system emphasizing bottom-up federalism. The Chinland Constitution (December 2023) established the Chinland Council through a coming-together federal vision, though it remains contested by the Interim Chin National Consultative Council, which favoured a *patin-nyin* (charter among elected representatives) over a *sagyok* (compact among armed actors). This illustrates the tension between revolutionary and democratic legitimacy within the horizontal model itself. The Ta'ang Political Consultative Committee approved a Ta'ang State Constitution in March 2023, with the Ta'ang Land Council formed in June 2025 as highest political authority. This same coalition is now drafting the Articles of Federal Transitional Arrangement (AFTA), the emerging *sagyok* that codifies the 'strong states, strong union' doctrine. The drafting coalition excludes the NUG, reversing the direction of authority: states write the rules for the union, not the reverse.

From the ethnic periphery, this proliferation of charters looks different, and the framing of this essay may appear Bamar-centric in ways worth acknowledging directly. Ethnic nationalities need not 'complete' a *do ayei* revolution they never owned; they have maintained treaty traditions since before Panglong that the Bamar centre repeatedly betrayed. These traditions did not develop in isolation. They emerged through sustained encounter with the Bamar centre and with colonial administration, yet produced genuinely horizontal documentary capacity where the centre did not. That the encounter was shared but the outcome asymmetric makes the Bamar documentary void all the more striking. The task, from this perspective, is not to inscribe a Bamar chant but to honour the Panglong

sagyok of 1947 — that awaits only the central recognition it has been denied for seven decades.

Both framings, ‘revolutionary completion’ and ‘treaty fulfilment’, require the documentary act. The military’s purely coercive integration has exhausted the cultural acquiescence on which previous consolidations depended. What differs is the direction of movement. The ethnic periphery possesses both the conceptual vocabulary for mutual obligation and the documentary practices to enact it. The Bamar centre has neither: decades of military rule suppressed declaration-type *kyeinyagyat* that make political claims, leaving little documentary foundation on which horizontal compacts can be built. Producing grassroots *sadan* is therefore a precondition, not an option. Where that capacity is absent, *sagyok* cannot take hold, and without *sagyok*, the post-revolutionary settlement will tend to reproduce the vertical hierarchy the resistance sought to displace. This transformation cannot be decreed; it emerges when parties who hold territory grant each other interpretive standing. South (2021; 2025) describes this as ‘emergent federalism’: not a single compact signed in a conference hall, but a network of mutual recognitions built through service provision, revenue-sharing, and coordinated governance. The logic of *sagyok* requires EAOs and resistance administrations as co-authors of any binding compact, not merely subjects of a new proclamation issued from the centre.

The Civil Disobedience Movement has accelerated this convergence. When an estimated seventy-five per cent of government workers refused to serve the regime, they did not reform the state from within; they abandoned it. Teachers, doctors, and civil servants fled to border areas and liberated territories, reconstituting themselves through trust-based reciprocal networks of the kind that have long sustained communities beyond state reach (Houtman, Lodge & Vaddhanaphuti 2025). Former state servants entered these spaces not as administrators extending central authority but as participants in horizontal exchange. This displacement compounds the documentary void at the centre: the very professionals with the literacy and administrative experience to produce *sadan* have left.

But it also creates an unprecedented encounter. Former state servants now live and work alongside ethnic communities whose documentary traditions never ceased. The convergence between Bamar documentary need and ethnic documentary experience is no longer hypothetical; it is a demographic fact of the post-coup landscape. Whether this proximity produces genuine *sagyok* or merely reproduces old hierarchies in new territory depends on whether the solidarity forged under shared threat can be inscribed before circumstance changes. The window is not permanent. Shared displacement creates conditions for horizontal compact-making; it does not guarantee them.

The ethnic nationality organisations’ *awza* derives not from cosmological markers legible only within a Bama Buddhist framework but from demonstrated governance: the accumulated *sadan* of decades of administration, adjudication, and treaty-making. This is a transferable form of authority. It does not require the other party to share your cosmological tradition, only to recognise your track record. The Bamar centre’s documentary void is therefore not merely a technical deficit but a legitimacy deficit that moral standing alone — however widely recognised across ethnic and religious communities — cannot substitute for. *Metta* generates goodwill; it does not generate the

specific, documented, enforceable commitments that parties with different histories of betrayal need before they will co-sign. The urgent task is not simply for the centre to produce its own *sadan* but to engage the emerging ethnic *sadan* as the basis for *sagyok*: mutual compacts that bind centre and periphery as co-equal parties rather than as patron and client.¹⁶

The guide's scoring framework bears this out at the level of the text. The ethnic state drafts produced through the ENSCC process between 2004 and 2008 score 2.75–3.00 on the vertical–horizontal scale in Burmese — a full point above the 1947 Constitution and two points above the military texts. The gap is not explained by political intention alone: the military constitutions and the ethnic drafts occupy opposite ends of the political spectrum, yet the difference in their scores reflects something more specific than ideology — the ethnic drafts' pronoun registers are less tributary, their obligation verbs less unilaterally prescriptive, their rights vocabulary less conditional on permission from above. Decades of working in *thabawtunyigyek* traditions left measurable traces in the grammar.

This is what the centre lacks and cannot simply borrow: not the vocabulary list but the habituated practice of writing horizontally under pressure, of revising a draft because a verb encodes the wrong direction of obligation, of choosing a genre-word because its associations do less damage to the compact's lateral structure. That practice is not taught; it accumulates through use. The ethnic periphery has had sixty years of it.

To avoid what Weber (1930: 182) called petrification into soulless routine, *sadan* requires active custodianship by what he termed legal notables (Weber 1978: 789–92). In Myanmar, the *pyinnya shi* (the educated, the intelligentsia) fulfil this role. Before 2021 they lacked institutional cohesion; the CDM has changed this, forging a status group from what was previously a dispersed category. They are the custodians the assembly task requires.

Vertical by default

The terms vertical and horizontal are used throughout this article in a precise but double sense. At the grammatical level, they describe the directionality encoded in linguistic forms: pronouns, address terms, and transitive verbs that position speakers and recipients on a ranked scale, with obligation and authority flowing downward from superior to subject, constitute the vertical register; forms that position speakers as co-equal parties, with obligation running laterally between named signatories, constitute the horizontal. This usage follows Agha's (2007) account of enregisterment: the vertical properties of literary Burmese are not intrinsic to the language but are the historical sediment of centuries of use in royal edicts, Pali commentary, and state proclamation, fused into a recognisable register that imports those associations whenever it is deployed, regardless of the drafter's intent.

At the constitutional level, vertical and horizontal describe the source and direction of political authority: a vertical arrangement derives legitimacy from a superior centre and

¹⁶ The dynamic reverses what Sahlins (2017: 39–42) describes as the stranger-king pattern, in which centres appropriate vitality from peripheries to renew themselves. Here the periphery's political technology, not its ritual potency, is what the centre requires, and the terms of exchange are set by those who possess what the centre lacks.

distributes authority downward to subordinate units; a horizontal arrangement derives legitimacy from the mutual recognition of co-equal parties and binds them laterally to one another. This usage follows Elazar's (1987) distinction between hierarchical command, contractual exchange, and covenantal compact, and his argument that federal arrangements in the strict sense require the covenantal form — parties who bind themselves to one another before any centre exists to validate the binding. The two senses are not independent. A constitutional arrangement that derives authority from a superior centre will tend to select the vertical grammatical register to express it, and that register will in turn reinforce the constitutional structure it encodes. The 2008 Constitution's *-daw* suffix and its *khwint-shi* rights vocabulary are not decorative; they are the grammatical face of the constitutional hierarchy. Conversely, a compact that genuinely distributes authority horizontally requires grammatical forms that enact that distribution at the level of every pronoun, verb, and conjunction — which is why the drafter's task in Burmese is assembly rather than recovery. The grammatical difficulty rests on an institutional foundation: Theravada Buddhism withheld cosmological sanction from lay bilateral obligation, leaving compact-drafters without the witnessing authority that covenant theology gave Western constitutionalism. You can swear on the Bible; there is no equivalent act in Theravada practice that binds two worldly parties to one another before a transcendent witness.

The student's observation that Myanmar people have never had the opportunity to say 'We' requires precision. The argument here is not that lexical structure determines political philosophy, a charge that might be levelled against culturalist approaches to Burmese history (Lieberman 2003; Taylor 2009).¹⁷ The void this article diagnoses is specific: the failure of the Bamar-led democracy movement to produce binding *sagyok* with ethnic co-signatories, not a general absence of political documentation across Myanmar's diverse communities.

A second objection follows from Leider's (2004) analysis of Bodawpaya's religious reforms, which warns that centralized textual production can impose orthodoxy rather than enable federation. The defence lies in the structural difference between *kyei nya gyet* (proclamation from a single centre) and *sagyok* (compact among co-equals); and in the fact that ethnic nationalities are already producing their own documentary authority — the Arakan Army's administrative texts under the 'Way of Rakhita' demonstrate as much. The task is coordination, not imposition.

The claim advanced here is narrower still: not that horizontal compacts are impossible in Burmese, only that they are linguistically arduous, requiring deliberate invention against

¹⁷ Lieberman's 'linear-cum-cyclic construction' demonstrates that political collapse and reconsolidation is recurrent in mainland Southeast Asia: each lowland corridor experienced accelerating integration punctuated by periodic disintegration (Lieberman 2003: 33-88). What the present article argues exceeds Lieberman's cyclical model. Previous collapses were followed by reconsolidation around a new centre; the 2021 collapse has not produced this pattern because the periphery possesses documentary capacity and institutional continuity that the centre lacks. Three conditions distinguish the current moment from earlier cycles: the ethnic armed organizations' continuous constitutional traditions, the CDM's physical evacuation of literate professionals from centre to periphery, and the FDC's adoption of a genre-word (*patinyan*) that pre-frames horizontal rather than vertical relationship. Whether this constitutes a genuine structural break or merely a longer interstitial phase remains to be demonstrated, but the evidence warrants treating it as potentially distinct from Lieberman's recurring pattern.

the grain of how the language ordinarily works. The difficulty is not uniquely Burmese. Sahlins (2017: 2-4) argues that all human societies originate as cosmic polities governed by metapersons: 'there are kingly beings in heaven even where there are no chiefs on earth.' Most political traditions have developed grammatical technologies to partially escape this inheritance — neutral pronouns, abstract citizenship categories, secular legal registers. Burmese formal registers have not. The cosmic architecture of hierarchy remains unusually intact in the literary language, which is why horizontal inscription requires such deliberate invention.

Myanmar faces a conceptual problem paralleling that of the French Revolution. Before 1789, the French 'we' was constituted vertically: people belonged to a collective through shared submission to throne or altar, not through lateral relation to one another. French lacked vocabulary for 'society' as something autonomous from church and state. Revolutionary thinkers had to invent horizontal relationships before the modern concept of 'we' — citizens encountering each other as equals on a horizontal plane — became thinkable. Heilbron (1995) traces how this linguistic infrastructure was built: new terms for communities organized not by vertical subordination but by horizontal association. The conceptual shift enabled the Revolution's declarations to achieve unprecedented uptake: they addressed a society that now had the vocabulary to recognize itself. With *do ayei*, Burmese protesters are attempting the same reinvention: reclaiming *do* as a horizontal collective rather than a vertical submission. But France possessed what Myanmar lacks: institutional traditions of collective deliberation, however hierarchical, that could be secularized into group political agency. The Estates-General was vertical, but it was a body. Burmese revolutionary tradition produces individual agents, not bodies. The grammar does not merely pull drafters toward vertical registers; it pulls them toward individual agency at the moment they need to constitute a group.

Those collective traditions included something further: a sacralizing mechanism for bilateral obligation. In monotheistic traditions, lifecycle rites operate under clerical supervision: baptism and marriage were codified as sacraments at the Council of Trent, and the covenant tradition gave Western constitutionalism a binding agreement between parties witnessed by transcendent authority. The secular social contract secularized this form but inherited its binding force.

Theravada Buddhism did the opposite. Burmese Buddhism classifies lifecycle ceremonies to do with reproduction as 'secular' (*loki*) and the Vinaya withholds monks from instrumental involvement in them (Houtman 2019). Naming, ear-piercing, marriage, consecration: these were historically managed by *ponna* or their Burmanized successors, the *beiktheik saya*, not by the Sangha. Marriage is auspicious (*mangala*) but not sacramental. No Buddhist authority witnesses or enforces the bond between the parties. The bilateral compact between worldly equals is not forbidden. It is beneath the level at which the tradition's most authoritative vocabulary operates. When drafters reach for moral authority to ground a binding agreement, they find that the only vocabulary with sufficient weight — *metta*, *karuna*, *dhamma* — is oriented toward universal compassion and individual liberation, not toward particular obligation between named parties.

Yet the same tradition that withheld from lifecycle ceremony produced the oldest continuously operating horizontal governance system in mainland Southeast Asia. The early Buddhist sangha was a self-governing republic in its internal structure. The Vinaya Pitaka prescribed formal quorum requirements, public introduction of motions (*natti*), proxy voting (*chanda*), secret ballot (*gulhaka*), majority rule (*yebhuyyasika*), and elected arbitration committees (*ubbahika*). No assembly could proceed without the presence or proxy of every resident member; a single absent voice invalidated the act. The Buddha refused to appoint a successor, declaring that the Dhamma-Vinaya itself would govern. Dutt (1924) established that early Buddhist recruits came from north-eastern Indian tribes whose constitutions were republican — peoples ‘quite familiar and conversant with free institutions like voting, committee, popular tribunals, and collective legislation’ — and that the sangha’s governance reflected those republican assemblies (*ganas*) contemporaneous with it, though Dutt himself treated the direct modelling as a ‘brilliant conjecture’ rather than established fact. The fortnightly *Uposatha* assembly, where monks recited the *Patimokkha* rules and confessed transgressions to one another as peers, enacted this compact in practice: a recurring, procedurally enforced act of mutual accountability that has operated across Myanmar’s villages for two and a half millennia.

This article’s diagnosis is therefore not that Buddhism is an obstacle to horizontal compact-making. It is that the court absorbed the tradition’s literary register while dismantling its governance machinery (Tambiah 1976: 102–31 offers the comparative frame: the Thai court performed the same absorption, and his analysis of how royal cosmology captured monastic literary authority applies directly to the Burmese case). For any drafter working in Burmese — whatever their own faith — the implication is the same: the procedural grammar for horizontal governance exists within the language’s own Buddhist inheritance, suppressed by the court for political rather than theological reasons, and available for recovery.¹⁸

The quarantine held because the sangha’s horizontal procedures never had an institutional pathway to lay politics. Inside the order, monks deliberated as equals: the Uposatha assembly enacted this compact fortnightly without external authority. But outside the order, the sangha-state relationship ran hierarchically in its own direction. Kings patronized the sangha through dana. The sangha’s moral authority constrained but did not bind the king’s coercive power. The horizontal governance was categorically internal. The court took the grammar of Pali scripture and used it to administer vertical authority, while discarding the procedures that gave that grammar its original horizontal meaning: the quorum, the ballot, the equal standing, the prohibition on proceeding without the consent of every resident member. It also discarded the oral embodied assembly those procedures

¹⁸ The crossing from monastic to civic governance has one notable precedent. B.R. Ambedkar argued before India’s Constituent Assembly on 25 November 1949 that parliamentary democracy was not a Western import but a recovery of India’s Buddhist institutional inheritance: he explicitly mapped *natti* (formal motion) onto parliamentary procedure and *salakagaha* (ballot) onto voting, concluding that India was returning to its own republican traditions rather than importing Western democracy. Jaffrelot (2017) characterises this as an ‘invention of tradition,’ but the textual mapping is defensible. The absence of any equivalent argument in Myanmar’s constitutional moments — from U Hpo Hlaing through Panglong to the FDC — is itself a finding.

required. Modern drafters inherited this selective borrowing: the written grammar of sacred authority without the governance tradition that grammar was built to serve. A drafter who reaches for sangha procedural vocabulary today is not importing foreign democratic concepts. That vocabulary belongs to the deepest layer of Myanmar's political inheritance. The court's suppression was political, not theological.

That capture operated at multiple levels. The Aggañña Sutta's account of the first king encodes a contractual appointment: primordial humans came together, deliberated, and chose Mahāsammata – 'appointed by the people' (mahājanena sammato) – delegating authority in exchange for a share of rice (Lammerts 2018: 66–67). Royal sovereignty in this tradition is not divine right but a conditional mandate, granted by the people because bad things had appeared among them. Yet the *dharmathat* tradition absorbed this electoral moment into legitimization of hierarchy rather than constraint upon it: the one-tenth rice share became the scriptural basis for royal taxation, not a reminder that the king serves at the people's pleasure.

The sangha's procedural grammar does not, however, include a bipartite written compact. The primitive sangha's authority was corporate and universal, binding all residents of a territorial boundary through the *sanghakamma*, not named signatories through negotiated terms. When two factions had a bitter dispute, the *Tina-vittharaka* procedure — literally 'covering over with grass' — required one representative from each side to make a general mutual confession, dissolving the conflict through retrospective absolution rather than forward-looking obligation. The written bilateral instrument arrived through a different route. By the twelfth century, Theravada communities were producing *katikavata* — formal written lawbooks governing monastic conduct — and by the Konbaung era the Burmese sangha was using actual *sagyok* for monastery construction contracts and lay-monastic obligation. The sangha offers the procedural grammar for horizontal governance. The written bilateral form came later, through the institutional interface between sangha and lay community, not from within monastic law itself. That institutional history is encoded in the language itself, in every pronoun, verb of transaction, and institutional name.

Burmese has a neutral word for 'social': *lu-hmu* (လူမှု), simply 'human affairs' or 'social matters.'¹⁹ The hierarchy is not encoded in abstract nouns. It is encoded in the grammar of interaction — in forms of address, verbs of transaction, and institutional naming. The problem is structural. The language lacks a rank-neutral second-person pronoun. English 'you' addresses anyone; Burmese forces a choice. *Min* (မင်း) speaks downward to inferiors or children. *Khin-bya* (ခင်ဗျာ) marks formality from men to equals or superiors. *Shin* (ရှင်) does the same for women. There is no conventionally neutral 'you' that addresses another human without positioning both speaker and listener on a vertical axis. The first-person pronoun is worse. Nissaya texts equate Pali *aham* ('I') with Burmese *nga*: the bare, pre-social self. But *nga* survives in polite usage only as the root buried inside *kyundaw* ('royal

¹⁹ Burmese has no single equivalent to Latin *societas*. The options encode cosmological station (*lu-baung*, the human realm as karmic abode), political mass (*lu-htu*, 'the masses' as undifferentiated block), blood loyalty (*amyo*, race/lineage), or bounded association (*athin*).

slave’) and *kyama* (‘female slave’). To speak politely is already to position oneself as a bondsman of the sacred sovereign. An earlier compound, *kyun-nok* (ကျွန်နတ်), made the self-abasement explicit: *nok* (နတ်) means insignificant, paltry, mean — so the speaker identified not merely as slave but as worthless slave. The form survives in the colloquial *kyok* (ကျုတ်), stripped of its overt etymology but carrying the structural logic intact (Lonsdale 1899).

Comparative linguists place Burmese among the most rigidly hierarchical pronoun systems in mainland Southeast Asia (Müller & Weymuth 2017).²⁰ The standard polite first-person plural, *kya-naw-do*, includes the *kyun* (slave/bondsman) morpheme; to claim collective ownership politely is literally to speak as ‘royal slaves.’ The Dobama movement’s adoption of *do* (from non-deferential *nga-do*) was not stylistic preference but structural necessity: it remains the only grammatical resource for collective self-assertion that refuses servant-positioning. To sign a *sadan* as *kya-naw* is to sign it as a subject; to sign it as *do* is to sign it as a citizen.

Even transitive verbs encode hierarchy. ‘To give,’ one word in English, splinters in Burmese into at least eight options depending on the vertical relationship. Upward: *set* (ဆက်) presents tribute to a superior, literally ‘connecting’ oneself to power. Judson glosses it ‘to present as to a king.’ *Hlu* (လှူ) offers to monks for merit, transforming the object into spiritual currency. *Kap* (ကပ်) is the ritual approach required by monastic rules: the layperson must bring and offer, because a monk cannot take directly. *Pu-zaw* (ပူဇော်, from Pali *pūjati*) worships or honours a teacher, parent, or spirit with the gift; one cannot *pu-zaw* a colleague without linguistically elevating them to the status of a deity. Downward: *chi-myint* (ချီးမြှင့်) is a superior bestowing bounty on an inferior. The dictionaries define it as ‘to elevate,’ confirming that even generosity from above is framed as patronage. *Sun* (စွန့်) is what monks do when they leave food for laity: renunciation, casting off, not sharing. *Kye* (ကြဲ) scatters feed to chickens or coins to beggars. The recipient has no individual standing; they are a mass to be scattered upon. And *thun laung* (သွန်းလောင်း) is the verb of the benevolent despot: to shower or pour benefits downward like water. The Pali-Myanmar *Abidhan* glosses the Pali *abhiseka* (royal consecration) as *thun laung*: when the regime builds a dam or a pagoda and pours water to solemnize the donation, they are enacting a vocabulary of royal anointing. One cannot *thun laung* upward.

²⁰ On fictive kinship address systems and politeness typology, see Brown, P. & Levinson, S.C. 1987. *Politeness: Some universals in language usage*. Cambridge University Press; Enfield, N.J. 2007. *A grammar of Lao*. Mouton de Gruyter, for comparative Southeast Asian data. The World Atlas of Language Structures (WALS Feature 45A) classifies languages by pronominal politeness distinctions. The regime’s enforcement of Literary Burmese (*sa*) over Colloquial Burmese (*saga*) functions as political technology impeding horizontal compact. In the mid-1960s, Ne Win’s government crushed the Modern Burmese Writing movement (associated with Dagon Taya and others) that advocated writing in colloquial style, branding it ‘Communist’ and subversive. Colloquial language is the register of equality (face-to-face address); literary language is the register of hierarchy (ruler to subject, petition to throne). By mandating literary style for official discourse, the regime ensured the state could only be addressed in vertical, deferential register. Literary Burmese uses sentence markers (*thi*, *myi*) implying authoritative statement; colloquial uses *te*, *me*. Writing a horizontal *sagyok* in the regime’s literary style is structurally difficult because that grammar resists equality at every turn. *Do ayei* is colloquial, inadmissible in official discourse precisely because it is horizontal. On the literary/colloquial distinction, see Okell 1965, 2002.

And the supposedly neutral option, *pei* (ပေး)? Okell (1969) notes that adding *-pei* to a verb implies the action is done ‘for someone else’s benefit.’ Even this horizontal-seeming word tends to encode a debt: one person provides, the other receives. The compound *pei-yu* (ပေးယူ, ‘give-take’) describes transactions, not reciprocity: at any given moment one party is the giver and the other the taker. The nearest Burmese candidate for ‘sharing’ is *we* (ဝေ, ‘to distribute’), but this encodes a centre-to-periphery dynamic: one person holds the whole and divides it among others. The compound *hmya-we* (မျှဝေ) attempts to combine ‘equality’ (*hmya*, to be equal or balanced) with ‘distribution,’ but still relies on the logic of division rather than mutual exchange. To construct a genuinely horizontal ‘we exchange’ without defaulting to commercial *pei-yu*, Burmese requires a four-part syntactic assembly: the reciprocity particle (*-khyin*), the distributive noun (*ta-u-nin-ta-u*, ‘one with one’), the plural action marker (*kya*), and the verb. Where English uses one word, Burmese needs a clause. The labour of construction is itself evidence of structural unfamiliarity.

‘To receive’ carries parallel encoding. *Yu* (ယူ) is neutral, simply to take or accept. But *khan* (ခံ) means both ‘receive’ and ‘suffer/submit,’ as in *amin khan* (အမိန့်ခံ, ‘receive command’) or *kyun khan* (ကျင့်ခံ, ‘accept servitude’). For monks receiving alms, Burmese borrows the Pali *pati-gah-ha* (ပဋိဂ္ဂဟ), marking the transaction as belonging to a separate religious register entirely. One cannot hand over an object without indexing the recipient’s status. The vocabulary tends to create a closed vertical loop: laity *hlu* (offer upward) to gain merit; superiors *chi-myint* (bestow downward) as patronage; monks *sun* (renounce) to gain liberation. Horizontality in Burmese is not found in the verb itself but must be constructed using the reciprocity particle *khyin* (ချင်း): one cannot simply ‘share’ (*we*); one must ‘give-receive mutually’ (*pei-yu*) or act ‘one-to-another’ (*ta-u-nin-ta-u*) to escape the vertical default. Within this grammar, speakers remain isolated actors on different rungs of the *lu-baung* (လူဘောင်, ‘human realm’) hierarchy unless they actively construct horizontality through particles and circumlocution.

The vertical grid extends beyond verbs into the arithmetic of the language. In Burmese, a bare number cannot attach directly to a noun; every count requires a numerative classifier, and the classifiers for human beings are stratified by status. *Pa* (ပါး) counts monks, royalty, and sacred objects; *yauk* (ယောက်) counts ordinary people. A compact that tallies state officials in *pa* and ethnic delegates in *yauk* has encoded constitutional hierarchy in its arithmetic before the first substantive clause. The classifier operates below conscious attention. A drafter alert to pronoun hierarchy may still count signatories in a register that ranks them.

The grammatical particle *taw* (တော်, sacred/royal) reveals how this vertical logic extends to institutions.²¹ It attaches to ‘state’ (*naing-ngan-taw*, နိုင်ငံတော်) and ‘military’ (*tat-ma-taw*, တပ်မတော်), encoding the polity as neo-royal rather than republican. After 1962, the regime selectively managed this suffix: it stripped *taw* from civil terms (*pya-taw-tha*, ‘state scholar,’ became simply *pya-tha*) while retaining it exclusively for the military and the state (Okell & Allott 2001: 302). The result was a linguistic reality in which only the Tatmadaw

²¹ Even *naing-ngan-tha* (‘citizen’) encodes filial dependency: *naing-ngan* (state) + *tha* (son/offspring), making the citizen literally ‘offspring of the state.’

and the Naingngantaw retained sacred status. Critics of the regime pointedly reject this honorific, preferring the generic *sit-tat* (စစ်တပ်) to strip away unearned sacred authority.

The vocabulary of rights confirms the vertical default. *Ahkwin*, officially defined as 'permission; leave,' encodes vertical dependency in the very act of claiming rights. To claim *lu ahkwin-ayei* (human rights) is structurally identical to a subordinate asking a superior for time off. The verb compounds the problem. *Taung* (တောင်း), the standard Burmese verb for requesting or claiming, derives from Pali *yācati* (to beg, to entreat); a beggar is a *taung-sa-thaw-thu*, one who eats by asking. The political compound *taung hso* (တောင်းဆို), routinely translated as 'to demand,' literally means 'to say a request': *taung* (request) plus *hso* (to say or state). Even when protesters 'demand' rights, the grammar positions them as petitioners announcing their supplication to the source of power. English distinguishes 'I claim X' (assertive, horizontal) from 'I beg for X' (supplicatory, vertical). Burmese defaults to the supplicatory register for both. The ambiguity is not merely etymological. Ethnographic research confirms that in contemporary usage *akwint-ayay* slides between 'right,' 'privilege,' 'chance,' and 'opportunity' depending on context — three independent translators of the same political poem gave three different renderings, none of which meant 'right' in the inalienable sense (Prasse-Freeman 2023: 207–208).

Horizontal vocabulary at the margins

Yet the horizontal resources noted above are more extensive than their marginal grammatical status might suggest. *Khyin* generates productive compounds: *a-khyin-khyin* (အချင်းချင်း) means 'mutually, reciprocally'; *lu-lu-khyin* (လူလူချင်း) means 'human to human.' *Tha-baw-tu* (သဘောတူ, literally 'disposition same') means to agree. *Kati* (ကတိ) denotes promise or vow. *Sagyok* (စာချုပ်) means contract or binding deed. But honesty requires acknowledging what the dictionaries reveal: *sagyok* derives from *sa* (writing) plus *khyok* (to bind, stitch, confine), sharing its root with *a-khyok* (lock-up, prison) and *ok-khyok* (to administer, to rule). The word binds without levelling. A master can sign a *sagyok* with a servant. This article's proposal to use *sagyok* for horizontal compact is therefore a deliberate appropriation, not a simple recovery. The equality must be built into the *sagyok* through its design, its signatories, and its interpretive structure, because the word itself will not supply it.

The horizontal resources that *can* supply equality lie elsewhere: in the reciprocity particle *khyin*, in the levelling morpheme *nyi*, and in the existing vocabulary of promise (*kati*) and consensus (*tha-baw-tu*). Significantly, the compound *tha-baw-tu-nyi* (သဘောတူညီ, 'to agree/reach consensus') contains the morpheme *nyi* (ညီ), meaning 'level' or 'even,' encoding genuine horizontality: minds becoming level. But *nyi* also anchors *nyi-la-khan* (royal levee), the gathering at which officials assembled before the King as equals of the dominated, not equals of one another. Even this most horizontal-seeming morpheme carries a vertical shadow. By contrast, the standard verb for 'negotiation,' *hnyi-hnaing* (ညှိနှိုင်း), means not 'meeting as equals' but 'adjusting and comparing': *hnyi* (to adjust, to fit) plus *hnaing* (to compare, to measure against). Political actors may spend years in *hnyi-hnaing* (adjustment) precisely to avoid reaching the equality that *tu-nyi* (levelling) demands. The Pali substrate contains a still stronger resource, examined below.

The vocabulary of reciprocity compounds the difficulty. Burmese has no single term for simultaneous, status-neutral mutual obligation. Instead, three constructions divide the concept into incompatible modes. *A-hle* (အလှည့်, turn, rotation) encodes sequential reciprocity: one party acts, then the other. Stewart and Dunn (1940) gloss it as 'turn, occasion, opportunity'; the compound *a-hle-ce* means 'revenge is settled,' framing reciprocity as score-settling rather than mutual aid. At any moment, one party holds power and the other waits. *A-pyan-a-hlan* (အပြန်အလှန်, literally 'returning and reversing') encodes reactive reciprocity: you act, I react in the opposite direction. The dictionary examples link it to 'answering back' and 'contradicting.' The 1990s ceasefires operated in *a-pyan-a-hlan* mode: you stop shooting, we grant extraction permits. *A-khyin-khyin* (အချင်းချင်း, 'among themselves') creates a closed circle of solidarity, but *khyin* establishes horizontality only among those sharing the same identity tag: *Bama-khyin* (Burmans among Burmans), *mein-ma-khyin* (women among women). It does not easily describe a compact between diverse entities unless they are first subsumed under a shared label.²²

A *sagyok* requires *a-khyin-khyin* (existential equality) rather than *a-hle* (taking turns at power) or *a-pyan-a-hlan* (transactional reciprocity), but it must somehow extend *khyin*'s closed circle to encompass parties who do not share a single identity. The Pali substrate contains precisely the concept Burmese narrows. The Tipitaka Myanma Abhidan equates Pali *aññamañña* (mutual, reciprocal, applying to diverse parties) with Burmese *a-khyin-khyin*, but in practice the Burmese construction restricts the Pali term's universality to same-category solidarity. The Buddhist philosophical tradition offers a still more striking resource: the Patthana's *aññamañña-paccaya* ('condition by way of mutuality') is illustrated as 'just like three sticks propped up one by another,' each dependent on the others for stability. This is a theological model for checks and balances: simultaneous mutual support among diverse elements. It exists within the very Buddhist canon that Burmese political culture draws on, yet it has not migrated from metaphysics to constitutional grammar.

Even borrowed political vocabulary gets re-encoded vertically. *Lutanza nyinyutyei* (လူတန်းစား ညီညွတ်ရေး, 'class solidarity') sounds horizontal: peers united within a shared stratum. But the morphology tells a different story. *Lutanza* (human-rank-partake) defines the group by its position in a top-down hierarchy: *tan* is 'rank, row, degree' and *sa* is 'to eat, to partake of revenue allotted to a specific tier,' the same morpheme in *myo-za* ('district-eater,' governor). The group exists because an administrative system has stratified it. *Nyi-nyut* ('level, even') encodes the same ambiguity identified above: the levelness of subjects arranged in their allotted rows, not the levelness of equals negotiating a compact. Class solidarity in Burmese is parasitic horizontality: peers united within a tier that only a vertical system can produce. The colloquial alternative *ta-sa-de* (တစ်စားတည်း, 'of one flesh') escapes this trap. It expresses organic solidarity without requiring a ranking system to constitute the group. But *ta-sa-de* belongs to everyday speech, not political drafting.

²² Stewart and Dunn 1940: 317-319 for *a-hlae*; Okell 1969 for *a-khyin-khyin* and *khyin* compounds. The Tipitaka Myanma Abhidan, vol. 8, equates Pali *aññamañña* with Burmese *a-khyin-khyin*. On *aññamañña-paccaya* as simultaneous mutual conditionality in the Patthana, see the Abhidhamma commentary tradition.

The grammatical resources for horizontal expression, though marginal, operate at three distinct levels. At the verb, the plural action marker *-kya* (ကြ) distributes agency across multiple actors: *kyeinya-kya-thi* ('they declare together') rather than a singular subject declaring on behalf of others. At the noun, the plural marker *-mya* (များ) distinguishes *lumyo-mya* (လူမျိုးများ 'peoples,' distinct groups) from *lu-myo* (လူမျိုး 'the people,' an undifferentiated whole), grammatically refusing the assimilation of ethnic identities into one. At the conjunction, the coordinate marker *-yaw...-pa* (ဧရာ...ပါ) avoids the implicit hierarchy of the standard conjunction *hnin* ('and/with'): *Bama-yaw Kayin-pa* ('both Burmans and Karens, coordinate') rather than *Bama hnin Kayin* ('Burmans and Karens'), which can read as 'Burmans, accompanied by Karens' (Okell 1969). A federal compact requires conscious assembly at all three levels because no single particle corrects the vertical default. The practical implication is that drafters face three distinct decision points in every clause: which verb form distributes rather than concentrates agency, which noun form preserves rather than assimilates ethnic plurality, and which conjunction coordinates rather than subordinates -- decisions that the companion guide to this article organises into a drafting checklist.

Spoken Burmese allows multimodal escapes that writing forecloses.²³ Even when grammar forces a speaker to say *kyanaw*, prosodic irony, spatial positioning, or synchronized chanting can subvert the encoded deference. The *do ayei* chant achieves horizontality through sound: when a crowd chants in unison, individual status markers dissolve into collective voice. But when the *lu-htu* (*the people, the populace*) sits down to write, silence returns the hierarchical pronouns. The transition from chant to compact is perilous because text strips away the multimodal escapes that speech allows. A *sadan* would need to encode in text what the chant achieves sonically and the roundtable achieves spatially.

Even in crisis, vertical logic reasserts itself in a recognisable form: the hope for a Setkya Min, the prophesied righteous ruler who will restore order from above. The expectation is not merely folk belief; it is a structural alternative to compact-making. Where the *sagyok* asks parties to bind themselves to one another, the Setkya Min fantasy asks them to wait for the right sovereign. Both respond to the same disorder, but only one produces a document that holds. Prasse-Freeman (2023) documents this tension ethnographically: activists report that villagers initially reject rights talk, seeking instead a 'protector' who will 'stand with them.' Only after months of sustained demonstration can activists tell communities 'you are also the heroes of your life.' That shift — from seeking a protector to becoming mutual witnesses — is precisely the transition from vertical to horizontal that a *sadan/sagyok* architecture would need to enable and sustain against the gravitational pull back toward the sovereign who will solve everything from above.

Hierarchy in the legal texts

These linguistic defaults are not abstractions. They operate in Myanmar's actual constitutional documents. Article 452 of the 2008 Constitution stipulates that

²³ On politeness as multimodally co-constructed through prosody, gesture, gaze, and spatial arrangement rather than lexically determined, see Jucker, A.H. & Hübscher, I. 2021.

interpretation ‘shall be based only on the Myanmar text,’ rendering the English translation legally irrelevant (Crouch 2019). The Burmese text also closes down possibilities the English reader cannot see: some pro-military stakeholders argue the Constitution allows provisions only to be ‘amended’ — not ‘added’ or ‘replaced’ — a reading fiercely defended in legislative debates because it rests on the deliberate omission of terms present in the 1947 Constitution (Crouch 2019: 209). The language of the document does not merely describe the polity; it restricts what can be imagined within it. International observers reading the English version encounter the neutral vocabulary of modern constitutionalism: ‘State,’ ‘Union,’ ‘citizen,’ ‘rights.’

Burmese readers encounter a different document. The ‘State’ is *Naing-ngan-daw*, carrying what translators of the National Convention Procedural Code explicitly note are connotations of ‘imperial power’ and pre-colonial royal glory. The military is *Tat-ma-daw*. Both bear the sacred suffix that positions them above the realm of ordinary accountability. The ethnic states (*pyi-neh*) that are supposed to be federal co-equals lack this sacral marking. One cannot negotiate horizontally between a divine entity and a secular one. What the ‘-daw’ suffix does is make that centralization legible to subjects as cosmologically grounded rather than merely coerced. It cloaks institutional force in a register of reverence, so that horizontal challenges from the secular periphery (*pyi-neh*) feel not just politically subversive but ontologically inappropriate. The suffix does not create this centralization — Suharto’s Indonesia achieved comparable institutional dominance without sacral vocabulary — but it makes that dominance feel inevitable rather than chosen.

The institutional enforcement operates separately, in law. Section 445 grants absolute immunity to the former military councils: ‘no proceeding shall be instituted’ against them for any act done in execution of their duties. Section 343(b) declares the Commander-in-Chief’s decisions in military justice ‘final and conclusive,’ removing military personnel from civilian jurisdiction entirely. The Tatmadaw occupies not just a sacred linguistic category but a separate legal caste. Section 361 reinforces the sacral framework by recognizing the ‘special position of Buddhism,’ casting the state in the traditional royal role of *sasana* protector. The Constitution describes the Tatmadaw as the ‘sole existing patriotic Armed Forces,’ claiming a monopoly on patriotism that rests on charismatic rather than rational-legal legitimacy. The resulting architecture is not a secular republic in which institutions serve citizens but a neo-royal order in which sacred institutions preside over subjects.

The vocabulary of rights confirms the pattern. The 2008 Constitution’s Chapter VIII renders ‘citizens enjoy the right to’ as *khwint-shi-thi* (‘has the permission’): *khwint* (permission, leave granted by a superior) combined with *shi* (to have, to exist). Rights are not ‘claimed’ (*taung-hso*) but ‘enjoyed’ (*kam-sa*) as a grant. Article 354 makes the conditionality explicit: citizens may exercise rights only *ma-hote-hlyin* (‘if not contrary to the laws enacted for Union security’). The conditional clause converts every right into a revocable licence. What the state permits, the state can revoke without violating the conceptual structure of the ‘right’ itself, because the right was never inherent. The 2008 Constitution compounds this by placing citizens’ duties (to uphold the Union, national solidarity, and sovereignty) as preconditions to their rights, positioning the citizen as subject before rights-holder. The framing concept is *si-kan* (‘discipline’): a ‘discipline-

flourishing democracy’ in which democratic participation is not an inherent right but a conditional grant, contingent on the citizen’s obedience to standards defined by the state.

Renshaw (2013) captures the constitutional logic precisely: duties are ‘conceptually prior to rights’ in Chapter VIII, so that citizens exist first as subjects of obligation and only derivatively as holders of entitlements. The linguistic and constitutional structures are not merely analogous; they are the same hierarchy in different registers. The rights language of the 1947 Constitution, from which this tradition descends, was itself not the product of indigenous Burmese political thinking: it was copied wholesale from Indian and Irish constitutional texts, then translated back into Burmese as *akwint-ayay* (Ewing 2020: 193). The permission-encoding was not inevitable — it was a translation failure at a specific historical moment. That matters: what a translation produced, a translation can correct.

The verbs governing the Union-state relationship encode the same directionality. Executive power is *ap-hnin* (‘entrusted,’ ‘conferred’) in the President, who then *kant-at* (‘appoints’) Chief Ministers. The Union *khwe-wei* (‘divides,’ ‘distributes’) its power downward to the states; the states do not grant power upward to the Union. Every verb describing the relationship flows from centre to periphery, from superior to subordinate. The vocabulary of authority reinforces this: the Tatmadaw participates in the ‘national political leadership role’ (*Amyo-tha Naing-ngan-ye U-hsaung-hmu*), a construction inherited from the 1974 Constitution’s grant of *U-hsaung* (‘to lead, to guide from the front’) to the Burma Socialist Programme Party. The ethnic states receive not *Aso-ya* (‘government,’ implying sovereign will) but *U-zi Aphwe* (‘Leading Body’), positioning them as local managers following central guidance. Section 98 vests all residual powers in the Union legislature; the states may legislate only on a narrow enumerated list. Chief Ministers are appointed by the President rather than elected locally, making them what Williams (2014) calls ‘French prefects’: instruments of central authority rather than leaders of a coordinate sphere. Even the separation of powers is hedged: Section 11(a) states that legislative, executive, and judicial powers are separated ‘to the extent possible,’ a qualifier that invites executive override rather than enforcing co-equal branches.

Even the resistance’s preferred term for the new polity carries inherited weight. *Pyidaungsu* (‘Union’) is the word the military loaded with centralist meaning, equating federalism with disintegration. The FDC reclaims it as ‘Federal Democratic Union,’ but the Burmese word retains its gravitational pull toward the centre. The ethnic armed organizations who insist on ‘Federal’ (*phe-de-ral*, a transliteration) rather than trusting *Pyidaungsu* alone are responding to this linguistic history.

The Federal Democracy Charter shows awareness of this trap and has made deliberate lexical choices to escape it. Measured against the 2008 Constitution’s encoding, the distance traveled is considerable. The most visible departure is the absence of *-daw*. Where the 2008 Constitution wraps the state in sacral terminology (*Naing-ngan-daw*, *Tatmadaw*), the FDC refers to a *Pyi-daung-su* without the royal suffix. The state is no longer linguistically divine. No institution in the Charter bears the marker that positions it above ordinary accountability.

The genre word is equally telling. The FDC titles itself *Patin-nyin* (ပဋိညာဏ်), derived from Pali *patīñña* and intended to mean covenant or solemn engagement. The choice is

deliberate: not *sadan* (authoritative record), not *kyei nya gyet* (sovereign proclamation), not *aMein* (executive order). Yet Burmese dictionaries gloss *patin-nyin* as *wun-khan* ('accepting a burden'), with *wun* meaning burden and *khan* meaning to receive from above. The word is closer to indenture than compact, encoding obligation running upward rather than reciprocity running across. What shifts the reading is the grammar in which the word is embedded. Its Part I bears the heading *Kyay-nya-sadan* (declaration), aligning with the truth-witnessing tradition rather than sovereign command. The preamble opens with *Pyi-thu-lu-htu* ('the people') and deploys *Do* ('our,' the Dobama pronoun) rather than *kya-naw-do*. Sovereignty flows upward from the populace rather than downward from a sacred centre. Taken together, these choices pull *patin-nyin* away from indenture toward compact — not by changing what the word means, but by surrounding it with grammar that enacts horizontal standing at every other level of the text.

The Charter's membership structure reinforces this horizontal framing. Section 2 lists its signatories using *pa-win* ('participate in,' 'join'), a verb of voluntary entry. The members include elected parliamentarians, political parties, ethnic resistance organizations, CDM unions, and civil society groups. They *participate in* the charter rather than being *governed by* it. This polyvocal membership is itself a structural innovation: no single actor holds interpretive priority.

Among its core values, the FDC lists *Su-paung Gaung-hsaung-hmu* ('collective leadership'), grammatically enforcing the 'we' of association rather than the 'I' of a single commander, and *A-pyan-a-hlan lay-sar-mu* ('mutual respect'). The reciprocity marker *a-pyan-a-hlan*, which this article identified as defaulting to reactive opposition ('trading blows'), is here modified by *lay-sar-mu* (respect) to construct a horizontal ethical obligation from a construction that ordinarily encodes retaliation. The Charter also introduces subsidiarity by name. Section 4 explicitly adopts the principle that decisions should be made at the level closest to the citizen, a concept entirely absent from the 2008 Constitution. And where the 2008 text grants ethnic states merely *ko-paing-ok-chok-khwint* ('the right to self-administration,' with *ok-chok* meaning 'to manage' under ultimate sovereign authority), the FDC substitutes *ko-paing-pyat-than-khwint* ('the right to self-determination,' with *pyat-than* meaning 'to decide one's own political destiny'). Where Section 361 of the 2008 Constitution casts the state as *sasana* protector, claiming the traditional royal role of Buddhism's guardian, Section 17 of the FDC separates religion and politics, stipulating that the state shall not favour any faith. Where the 2008 Constitution provides no mechanism for the populace to initiate constitutional change, the FDC commits to a Constitutional Assembly elected by the people.

Yet the structural challenge persists. To sound authoritative and legally binding, the FDC's Burmese text still gravitates toward the high-formal register (*sa-pe*) that carries legal gravitas. That register is the register of *kyei nya gyet*: the grammar of sovereign proclamation, not mutual compact. The FDC's drafters confront the same dilemma the Dobama movement faced in the 1930s: colloquial Burmese lacks legal authority; formal Burmese imports hierarchical encoding. The Dobama resolved this by writing the colloquial spelling *dó* (ဝံ) instead of the standard literary *tó* (တံ), physically encoding the spoken register in print. The literary register's authority is not inherent but historically acquired: centuries of use in royal edicts, Pali scripture, and state documents have fused

the formal register with sovereign command, so that writing in it imports those associations regardless of the drafter's intent (Agha 2007).

The FDC has adopted that pronoun, but the deeper grammatical architecture remains to be addressed. A federal compact requires not just new words but a new register: a legal Burmese that is authoritative without being authoritarian, that binds without subordinating, that addresses its readers as co-signatories rather than subjects receiving instruction. What this might sound like is suggested by the workshop participants who coined *gadi sagyok*: a compound assembling voluntary commitment (*gadi*) with binding force (*sagyok*), neither word sufficient alone but together sketching a register that the literary language does not yet supply. These are not cosmetic adjustments. They are systematic attempts to rebuild the grammar of statehood.

Specific clauses demonstrate the persistence. Part I, Chapter 4 (Federal Principles, Item 18) frames the distribution of power as *ana hkwe-wei-hmu* (အာဏာခွဲဝေမှု): *hkwe* means to split, *wei* means to hand out. The compound posits a pre-existing 'Power' held by the Union that is then cut up and distributed to the states. This contradicts coming-together federalism, in which states possess original power and delegate limited functions upward. Sentences throughout end with *myi* ('shall'), the future-command marker of royal and military decrees. The text does not say 'we agree to build'; it says 'it shall be built.' This grammatical mood positions the drafters as a proto-sovereign issuing proclamation rather than equal parties signing a compact. Even the Charter's treatment of its own revolutionary base slips into command vocabulary: Part I, Item 32 describes the state's relationship to CDM organizations using *kye-kyat* (supervision, control), retaining the administrative mindset of the central state overseeing the population that constitutes it.

The alternatives are documented and available. The Manerplaw Agreement used *lwal-ap* (လွှဲအပ်, to transfer and entrust) rather than *ap-hnin* (bestowal from sovereign to subordinate): states assign power upward to a common agent, retaining the remainder. Where the 2008 Constitution's verbs flow from centre to periphery, *lwal-ap* flows from constituent parts to centre. The companion guide traces this substitution across the ethnic state constitutional drafts from 1992 to the present. For rights language, the equivalent substitution is *athíahmak pyú* (အသိအမှတ်ပြု, to recognize): an epistemic act between peers, acknowledging what already exists, rather than *ahkwín* (permission granted from above) or *ap-hnin* (authority conferred by a patron). For naming the compact's participants, *a-hpaw* (အဖော်, mate, companion) avoids the hierarchies embedded in *nauklaik* (follower, one who goes in the space behind) and *kyun* (subject, bondsman). Small lexical choices, but ones that determine whether the document's grammar works with or against its stated commitments.

The Charter is not without horizontal resources. Its operative formula *Let-khan-tha-baw-tu-nyi-kya-thi* ('We accept and agree together') deploys the plural particle *-kya* to construct collective agency. But this horizontality lives in a few operative verbs, while the distributional grammar, command markers, and supervisory vocabulary structure the document as a whole. The Tatmadaw's conduct offers the negative proof: its consistent avoidance of signed agreements with ethnic armed groups between 1989 and 2010

confirms that the generals understood a signed document between named parties implies co-equal standing (Cheesman 2002; South 2008).

Contested vocabulary

Resistance practice has outpaced available vocabulary. The state's weaponization of *taingyintha* (national 'races') illustrates the danger. From a marginal colonial-era term, *taingyintha* was institutionalised under Ne Win after 1962 and made the legal precondition for full citizenship by the 1982 Citizenship Law, which reserved automatic citizenship by birth for those born to taingyintha parents. By 2008, national races had 'trumped' citizenship, lexically and legally (Cheesman 2017: 461): the 2008 Constitution addresses its political community not as citizens but as aggregated national races, making taingyintha the precondition for belonging rather than a subcategory within it. The framework functions as a constitutive outside: Rohingya and other Muslim minorities are not incidentally excluded but structurally designated as what the nation is not. When Rohingya advocates argue for inclusion as taingyintha, they validate the very framework that excludes them (Cheesman 2017: 461–462). Ethnic nationality organisations have found one route around this trap: from the late 1980s, groups including the Karen National Union and Chin National Front turned to the UN framework of 'Indigenous Peoples' to claim self-determination on the international stage, bypassing the state's 135-group taxonomy entirely (Dunford 2019: 54, 57–63). The concept constrains imagined futures, offering little established vocabulary for cross-ethnic solidarity, citizenship divorced from blood, or pluralistic governance.

Phyo Win Latt (2020) traces how *amyo*, originally meaning 'relatives' or 'people of the same kind,' was transformed under colonial and post-colonial *kyei nya gyet* into a rigid category of bounded lineage demanding protection from perceived outsiders. Contemporary *sadan* would need to shift the genre from reactive (communities united by shared offence against outsiders) to constitutive (communities united by shared covenants with historical adversaries), articulating principles that expand belonging rather than police its boundaries.

The horizontal resources identified above — the reciprocity particle *khyin*, the levelling morpheme *nyi*, the Patthana's *aññamañña-paccaya* — exist but have not been mobilised for political use. Horizontal grammar is a necessary condition for horizontal politics, not a sufficient one. The *sagyok* must be backed by the political relationships, territorial realities, and enforcement mechanisms that give its clauses operational force. But without the grammar, the politics has no documentary form in which to be sustained.

The documentary traditions capable of bypassing the taingyintha framework are not waiting to be invented. The AA's 'Way of Rakhita' draws explicitly on the Rakhine *areidawbon* tradition, asserting a distinct political and cultural destiny within voluntary federation. Notably, these documentary traditions are not confined to Buddhist communities. Saw Aung Hla's 1939 *History of the Pgakanyaw* adapted the *yazawin* chronicle form for Karen Christian purposes, claiming sovereign legitimacy through inhabiting rather than rejecting the documentary canopy associated with Bamar kingship. The terms *sadan* and *sagyok* function as civilizational infrastructure available across confessional lines, not as instruments of Buddhist hegemony.

The FDC creates possibilities, promising rights for Rohingya and self-determination, arrangements traditional vocabularies struggle with (CRPH 2021). But the Charter had one instrument that could have broken the taingyintha logic domestically: commitment-based membership, the *sagyok* principle that whoever signs belongs to the do the compact constitutes. Instead, the Charter's preamble and operative clauses retain taingyintha *lu-myo-mya* as their primary political category, switching to *naingantha* (citizen) only in the rights provisions. A document that grants rights to citizens while defining membership through national races has not escaped the framework — it has reproduced it with better legal manners.

Defining the *do*, determining who is included in the 'We,' is not a linguistic given but the central political project of the revolution. The word itself is a floating signifier: the dictator says *do Tatmadaw* ('our armed forces') to enforce complicity; the resistance says *do ayei* ('our cause') to mobilize solidarity. The difference lies not in the grammar but in the process of mutual recognition that gives the pronoun content. A *sagyok* anchors that process in text, transforming a contested pronoun into a binding compact. A *sagyok* framework could bypass taingyintha categories entirely, grounding membership not in ethnic classification but in the act of signing: whoever commits to the compact belongs to the do it constitutes. The vocabulary problem and the membership problem are the same problem. What the contested pronoun cannot settle, the signed text can — but only if the text encodes horizontal standing from the first word rather than importing the taingyintha logic through its membership clauses, as the FDC's preamble currently does.

Myanmar's vernacular declarative traditions

These are not new problems. The documentary traditions that encode these defaults stretch back over a century. Austin's (1962) speech act theory helps clarify their political effects. The military operates through what Burmese terms *kyei nya* (ကြေညာ), 'to announce' or 'proclaim,' but the language distinguishes registers within this vertical mode. *Kyei nya sadan* (ကြေညာစာတမ်း) denotes a formal proclamation such as the 1948 Declaration of Independence; *kyei nya gyet* (ကြေညာချက်) is the shorter form used for government declarations and communiques, distinct from *amein* (executive orders) though both operate within the vertical register. Both share the same political geometry: vertical transmission from ruler to ruled, demanding passive reception rather than negotiated consent.

As Than Tun demonstrated in his ten-volume *Royal Orders of Burma* (1983-1990), the Konbaung kings ruled through a relentless stream of *amein-daw* (royal orders): written, precise, and unilateral. These were texts of subjugation, not liberation; they bound the subject to the sovereign but placed no constraint on the sovereign himself. If the current proliferation of charters merely replicates this pattern, replacing the military's *kyei nya gyet* with a revolutionary *amein*, it will fail to break the cycle of authoritarianism. The revolutionary act is not the production of text per se but the production of *sagyok* (contractual text) that binds the ruler as firmly as the ruled.

The same Theravada inheritance that supplied the Aggañña Sutta's contractarian account of kingship — already noted in the preceding section — shaped Burma's own legal apparatus in a distinct but related way. The Manugye dhammathat — the most

comprehensive of the 175 dhammathats recorded in Burmese legal literature and the primary reference text for Konbaung courts through the colonial period — grounds judicial authority not in sovereign command but in *samadhi*: concentrated, morally purified mind that alone can perceive the law correctly. Manugye specifies that judges must possess morality (*thila*), concentration (*thamadi*), and wisdom (*panna*) together; those whose decisions are influenced by desire, anger, fear, or ignorance are to be dismissed at the council’s recommendation. Arbitration benches were literally called ‘samadhi benches’ (*thamadi san*); the standard scale of measurement was the ‘samadhi scale.’ Judicial authority, in this tradition, is earned and can be forfeited — accountability built into the institutional vocabulary itself.

More striking still: the law, in the Manugye narrative, is not promulgated by the king but discovered by a renunciant who attains samadhi, ascends through concentration practice, reads the law inscribed on the boundary wall of the solar system, copies it, and brings the document back. The document precedes and authorises the sovereign, not the reverse. This is precisely the logic the *sadan* tradition encodes: inscribed record as source of authority, not instrument of power already held. Manu status, furthermore, is not ascribed by birth but earned — and the narrative demonstrates that it can be lost when judgment fails, as the cow-herder judge loses divine and popular approval through his ruling on the cucumber. U Hpo Hlaing was not inventing a tradition when he appealed to Mahasammata; he was recovering one that had operated in Burmese courts throughout the dynasty his king presided over.

The most ambitious pre-colonial attempt to turn the *sadan* tradition against sovereign unilateralism was U Hpo Hlaing’s *Rajadhammasangaha* (1878), presented to King Thibaw within weeks of his accession. Drawing on the *aparihaniya* rules from the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, U Hpo Hlaing argued that governance must proceed through *sannipata* (assembly) and *samagga* (consensus) rather than individual command. The content is striking. He observed that Burmese kingdoms ‘failed to obtain both these types of agreement together, *sannipata* as well as *samagga*, in their meetings and consultations,’ while Western parliamentary systems had preserved both for centuries. He warned that power held in the belief that ‘I, myself, alone and on my own, am omniscient’ is ‘like honey mixed with poison in the mouth; it may be sweet for the instant, but it will kill when it reaches the belly’ (Bagshawe 2004: 95-96). The text proposed an expanded Hluttaw of fourteen ministries with genuine deliberative authority, constraining the king’s expenditure and requiring assembly consent for legislation.

The Burmese text reveals a richer horizontal vocabulary than the English translation conveys. Alongside the Pali *sannipata* and *samagga*, U Hpo Hlaing deploys vernacular terms: *nyi-nyut* (ညီညွတ်, unity/harmony) and *si-yon* (စည်းရုံး, solidarity/organize) appear in the *agati* passage on collective wisdom, and *si-yon* recurs in the section heading on power distribution, where it modifies *ana* to produce *paung-su-si-yon-thaw ana*: collective assembled power as distinct from *ta-u-teh ana*, the power of one individual alone (Maung Htin 1979: 151). U Hpo Hlaing was arguing for the redistribution of *ana*, not just *awza*. The dedication heading uses *patinyan* (ပဋိညာဏ်), the same Pali-derived term the Federal Democracy Charter would adopt 143 years later. The biographical preface links U Hpo Hlaing’s discussion of the Mahasammata to the concept of a social compact (*lu-a-hpweh-a-*

si patinyan), describing the relationship between ruler and people as an a-pyan-a-hlan patinyan: a mutual pledge. U Hpo Hlaing used the word with horizontal intent in 1878, though the lexicographic tradition already glossed it as wun-khan (burden-acceptance). The Aggañña Sutta supplies the answer the dictionaries cannot: the horizontal reading was a recovery. The Sutta's account of Mahasammata as collective election, not divine commission, was available in Buddhist scriptural education throughout the Konbaung period. U Hpo Hlaing was restoring a contractarian meaning that the royal apparatus had not eliminated, only suppressed.

Yet the form of the Rajadhammasangaha contradicts its content. The dedication frames it as 'Laws by which Kings, Masters of land and water, Masters of their countries, should rightly be bound in their behaviour,' employing the full apparatus of royal address. The nigon (formal conclusion) identifies the author through five generations of royal patronage: grandfather, father, and self, each 'comrade in arms of the King.' The Burmese text uses kya-nup (ကျနပ်, formal/scholarly I) rather than kya-naw (ကျနော်, royal servant), positioning U Hpo Hlaing as a scholar concluding a kyan (treatise) rather than a subject prostrating before a sovereign. The vertical register governs the framing; the horizontal argument proceeds in impersonal constructions and third-person historical examples. U Hpo Hlaing could not write himself into the assembly he proposed. When he described Western parliaments, he mapped them onto the hluttaw (လွှတ်တော်), the existing royal council vocabulary, arguing that what the West had achieved was already present in Buddhist tradition. The move is recovery, not borrowing. But by naming a horizontal institution with a vertical word, he carried the hluttaw's associations with it: a council that served at the king's pleasure.²⁴

U Hpo Hlaing was dismissed within two months. The text remained in parabaik manuscript, reaching print only in 1915; U Hpo Hlaing continued writing after dismissal but turned to non-political scholarship, never attempting to circulate the Rajadhammasangaha beyond the court, because the genre had no mechanism for wider distribution. The reformers, Bagshawe notes, 'seem to have been taken completely by surprise and there was no effort to protest or to present a common front.' The sadan had awza but no distributed interpretive structure, no co-equal signatories, no mechanism for binding its audience. It is the earliest documented case of what the border-town workshop would reveal 148 years later: horizontal content captured by vertical form. The 1979 printed edition that made the text accessible was prepared by Maung Htin (U Htin Fatt) — the same writer who, in Nga Ba, had given the nga-marked peasant a colloquial voice against the resistance of the literary apparatus. Maung Htin was also U Hpo Hlaing's biographer and translator of the Rajadhammasangaha itself: the man who recovered the king's most subversive critic for the twentieth century was the same man who had insisted the excluded peasant deserved a literary voice.

²⁴ The vertical register in direct address is documented vividly in the biographical preface. When King Mindon threatened U Hpo Hlaing with a spear during a dispute, he replied ထိုးတော်မူလခါဘုရား ('Strike then, my lord'), using *hpaya* (ဘုရား), the term for both Buddha and king. The same man who argued for assembly governance addressed sovereign power in the only register available for the encounter (Bagshawe 2004: 69; Maung Htin 1979: 72).

The Panglong Agreement was formally a *sagyok* (စာချုပ်), the term for international treaties requiring continuous interpretation by co-equals. This requirement for continuous interpretation is structural, not merely procedural. A *sagyok* differs from a *kyei nya gyet* not only in origin but in how it persists through time. Where sovereign proclamation fixes meaning at the moment of promulgation, a binding compact remains alive only through the ongoing consent of its signatories. Each party retains standing to interpret the agreement's terms; none can claim final authority over its meaning. When the central state reduced the Panglong Agreement to 'Panglong Spirit,' it was precisely this interpretive standing that was revoked. The ethnic signatories were no longer treated as co-equals entitled to contest the compact's meaning but as subjects of a meaning already determined. The transformation from *sagyok* to 'spirit' was a structural annihilation of the document's binding character. Williams (2014) notes that this annihilation was enabled by the Agreement's inherent thinness: it promised 'full internal autonomy' without defining it, excluded the Karen entirely, and left Aung San's revenue commitments uncoded in actionable mechanisms. The central state did not merely betray a robust compact; it exploited the gaps a weak one had left open. The lesson for contemporary drafters is concrete: a *sagyok* that leaves its core commitments undefined supplies the tools of its own dissolution.

Yet the Agreement's signatory block achieved horizontality through a mechanism that remains instructive. Aung San signed for the Burmese Government with his name alone, dropping the honorific U and the military title Bogyoke. The Shan Committee used feudal territorial titles as primary identifiers: Saohpalong of Tawngpeng State, Saohpalong of Yawnghwe State. The Kachin Committee used names with geographic identifiers: Sinwa Naw, Myitkyina; Zau La, Bhamo. The Chin Committee took the opposite path, assimilating to Bamar-colonial norms: U Hlur Hmung A.T.M. Falam. Each group chose its own convention; none was imposed on the others. The block reads as horizontal not because all parties adopted a single format but because four distinct strategies of self-designation occupied the same structural position on the page. Diversity of title, equality of position. Contemporary drafters face the same choice: mosaic (each signatory uses the honorific native to their community), institutional (signatories appear in organizational capacity without personal honorifics), or levelling (all honorifics dropped by consensus, following Aung San's precedent). What the Panglong block demonstrates is that the choice itself must be deliberate.

The Tipitaka Myanma Abhidan confirms what the etymology implies: it glosses the Pali *bandhaka* ('that which binds, fetters') as *sagyok* (Tipitaka Myanma Abhidan, vol. 15: 109), and uses it consistently for debt contracts, mortgage instruments, and financial obligations. The word guarantees binding, not equality.

The technology of lateral binding, then, was not absent from Burmese life. Debt contracts, mortgage instruments, land transactions, and commercial obligations all operated through *sagyok* — binding agreements between parties who held each other to account. What confined this technology was the monarchy's sacralization of the political sphere. The domain marked by *taw* — the *hluttaw*, the royal *amein-daw*, the apparatus of sovereign command — was the king's preserve, where subjects petitioned but did not contract. The military inherited this exclusion intact. The *tatmadaw* carries *taw* in its name; the

constitutional *hluttaw* retains the royal council's suffix. Extending *sagyok* from the commercial domain into the political one — from binding debtors to binding political communities — is the act the resistance has not yet performed.

The 'shoe question' (1916-1919) demonstrates the power of *sadan* through direct contestation between documentary genres. When Europeans refused to remove their shoes upon entering pagodas, Ledi Sayadaw published *Sāsanavisodhanī*, a 95-page *sadan* establishing religious authority against the practice through systematic intellectual witness. The British responded with the Resolution of October 1919, a *kyei nya gyet* reserving the right to use force 'when necessary.' The *sadan* prevailed because Buddhist communities accepted it based on religious authority, while the colonial command lacked moral legitimacy (Turner 2014). U Thein Maung's physical erasure of 'except to Europeans' from pagoda signboards illustrates the transition from textual witness to direct reclamation of sovereignty, a pattern the current revolution repeats when resistance administrations replace military signage with their own.

The YMBA (founded 1906) and the Dobama Asiayone perfected this declarative mode. As the earlier analysis of do ayei showed, the DBA's foundational pamphlets deployed the colloquial possessive do exclusively, rejecting the literary register as complicit with sovereignty. Their slogan 'words have power to define and compel' theorized what the chant performed: that claiming the colloquial voice was itself a political act (Khin Yi 1988: 34).²⁵²⁶

Paradoxically, the *sadan* mode flourished more readily under colonialism than under the Tatmadaw. Colonial rule, though coercive, permitted spaces for indigenous moral authority: monasteries, lay associations, and vernacular publishing operated with relative autonomy, allowing *sadan* to circulate and achieve uptake. The post-1962 military state closed these spaces through censorship, surveillance, and the systematic cooption of resistance vocabulary. The scarcity of *sadan* under military rule reflects not the absence of grievance but the systematic destruction of conditions required for moral witness to cohere. The tradition survived only in prison and the borderworlds: Thakin Soe's *Insein Sittan* circulated as underground treatise, while ethnic armed organizations produced history textbooks in refugee camps that functioned as *sadan*. The National Ceasefire Agreement of 2015 briefly reproduced this condition at scale: it used 'federalism,' 'self-determination,' and 'the Spirit of Panglong' — vocabulary the 2008 Constitution deliberately excludes — generating legitimacy by evoking 'the legacy of this important agreement' rather than the authority of the military-state (Crouch 2019: 204). The ceasefire achieved in documentary form what protest achieved vocally: horizontal

²⁵ On the *nga-do* etymology and the Dobama movement's deliberate use of the non-deferential register, see note 8. Nemoto (2000) usefully contrasts Dobama with Thudo-bama ('Their Burma') to distinguish nationalists from collaborators.

²⁶ Bateson's (1936) concept of symmetrical schismogenesis describes this dynamic: parties trapped in competitive escalation adopt each other's tactics rather than transcending the structure of contest. Sahlins (2017: 23-25) applies similar logic to centre-periphery relations. The Dobama inversion created a 'Republic of Kings' rather than abolishing kingship as a political category.

vocabulary claimed outside the vertical constitutional frame. Its fragility demonstrated what constitutionalising that vocabulary would require. Leach (1954) observed that egalitarian (*gumlao*) revolts in the highlands historically oscillate back toward hierarchy (*gumsa*) once the external threat recedes. The *sadan* is precisely an attempt to arrest this pendulum, to constitutionalize the revolutionary moment before structural gravity reasserts itself.

Ritual traditions like the Kachin Manau demonstrate that performed acts can themselves constitute binding political arrangements, spatially encoding hierarchy and alliance without written text (Sadan 2013: 112-148). The difference is not between text and performance but between negotiated commitment and coerced submission. The Manau ratifies alliances through voluntary participation; the *ayeidawbon* imposes them through conquest. The resistance has achieved what neither colonial administration nor military rule could manufacture: the cross-ethnic social will that Furnivall (1948) argued plural societies lack. The *do ayei* is its embryonic expression; the *sadan* crystallizes rather than creates this unity.

The gap is visible even in the most informed federalism writing on Myanmar. The federalism conversation as a whole tends to ask whether the political will for federal arrangement exists, not whether the documentary and linguistic tools exist to inscribe it. A recent Burmese-language working paper on inclusive federalism for Mosaic Myanmar by Francis Loh Kok Wah (Loh 2026a; Loh 2026b) illustrates the pattern. It competently applies Furnivall, Anderson, and the Belgian multicultural model to Myanmar's situation. It invokes *Panglong* spirit as the aspirational foundation for a new federal union. It never examines what kind of document the Panglong Agreement actually was, or whether its documentary form created binding horizontal obligations. The key political vocabulary is almost entirely transliterated: *phederal sanit* (ဖက်ဒရယ်စနစ်), *dimokreisi* (ဒီမိုကရေစီ). If Burmese possessed indigenous vocabulary for horizontal political compacts between self-constituting communities, the transliterations would be unnecessary. Their ubiquity across the federalism literature marks the absence of the very thing that literature claims to be building.

South (2021) documents ethnic governance and federalism from below with unmatched depth, but treats ethnic documentary traditions as evidence of political capacity rather than as a distinct generic practice. Bhattacharyya (2020) notes that Nepal faced a 'linguistic problem of translating federalism terms into Nepali' but treats this as lexical deficit, not grammatical obstruction. Burmese has the words; it borrows them freely. The problem is that the grammar resists what those words are supposed to do. The ethnic nationality organizations who have maintained continuous declaration-making traditions since 1949 have been working on precisely this problem for decades. Their documentary expertise, not another round of institutional design, is where the answer will come from. The following section measures how far that work has travelled and how far it still has to go.

Measuring the vertical default

The argument so far rests on close reading: individual words, suffixes, verb forms, genre classifications. Close reading reveals what is there. It cannot easily show what is consistent

across documents, what changes over time, or where the vertical default is strongest. For that, a comparative framework is needed.

Eight dimensions capture the vertical–horizontal continuum in a political document, each scored on a five-point scale from fully vertical (1) to fully horizontal (5): source of legitimacy, pronoun register, verb grammar of obligation, rights framework, implied addressee, openness to contestation, relationship to existing power, and drafting language choice. When a document exists in both Burmese and English, each version is scored separately. The gap between scores is itself an analytical finding. Table 1 in the companion guide, *Writing Horizontal Compacts*, scores twelve documents from across Myanmar’s constitutional history: the three national constitutions (1947, 1974, 2008), the Panglong Agreement, the Dobama declarations, seven ethnic state constitutional drafts produced through the ENSCC process between 2004 and 2008, the Manerplaw Agreement, and the Federal Democracy Charter. The scoring is interpretive, not mechanical. It draws on the linguistic evidence presented in preceding sections. Other readers with different competencies in Burmese may arrive at different numbers. The value lies in the pattern, not the precision of any individual score.

Table. Vertical–horizontal scores for selected documents (condensed from companion guide)

Document	English (/40)	Burmese (/40)	Divergence
1974 Constitution	12	8	4
2008 Constitution	12	8	4
1947 Constitution	22	17	5
Panglong Agreement	26	22	4
Dobama declarations	26	26	0
Ethnic state drafts (range)	26–28	22–24	4
Federal Democracy Charter	32	29	3
Manerplaw Agreement	34	30	4

Document	English (/40)	Burmese (/40)	Divergence
Indonesian Constitution (1945)	33	—	—

Scores are interpretive, not mechanical. Eight dimensions, each scored 1–5. Full scoring methodology and document-by-document analysis appear in the companion guide.

The ethnic state drafts reveal a striking pattern. Between 2004 and 2008, constitution-makers from Arakan, Karen, Shan, and Chin communities produced detailed constitutional drafts – and almost all chose English as the drafting language. The Chin constitution (Article 249) declares the English original authoritative and all translations subordinate. The Shan commission included representatives from Wa, Akha, Lahu, Lisu, Pa-O, and Kayan communities; these were not English-educated elites writing for an international audience, yet they reached for English. When ethnic nationality constitution-makers needed a language for horizontal federal design, they chose English not because they lacked competence in Burmese but because Burmese lacked competence in horizontality. The entire apparatus of horizontal constitutional design existed in English because Burmese constitutional tradition had been vertical: royal decree, colonial ordinance, military proclamation. The bilingual divergence documented above measures this condition; the ethnic drafters’ language choice confirms it.

The Shan draft, the only one with extractable Burmese text, demonstrates why. Its Foreword explicitly lists ‘horizontal’ as a drafting approach. Yet its operative clause on popular sovereignty states that sovereign power ‘descends from’ the people of Shan State. The English ‘derives from’ is directionally neutral. The Burmese verb literally means ‘to descend, to come down.’ Even when drafters articulate the foundational principle of popular sovereignty as clearly as any constitutional text could, the Burmese verb encodes downward movement. Power descends from the people to the organs of state. The hierarchy has been inverted, not flattened. Same axis, different apex. The verb betrayed an intention the drafters had stated in their own Foreword.

The Indonesian Constitution provides an external benchmark. Drafted in Indonesian — a language whose early nationalists explicitly sought to strip of hierarchical registers and social indexes, aiming for what Keane (2003: 518) calls ‘neutrality and freedom from hierarchy’ — it scores 33 out of 40. *Kami* and *kita* carry no status encoding; *hak* is a right possessed, not a permission granted; *wajib* encodes obligation without the vertical directionality of Burmese *khwint-shi*. Its bilingual divergence is zero: Indonesian carries no hierarchical encoding that translation into English would strip away. The FDC’s English score nearly matches Indonesia’s. The FDC’s Burmese score does not. The three-point gap measures the cost of building horizontality within a language that will not supply it freely. What Indonesia achieved by switching languages, Myanmar’s drafters must achieve by rewriting grammar from within.

The bilingual divergence is remarkably consistent: 4 points (mean 0.50) for every document except two. The 1947 Constitution diverges by 5 points, the highest in the corpus. The *nhinn-ap* finding explains why: ‘give to ourselves’ in English becomes ‘bestowed’ in Burmese, reversing the entire act of popular self-constitution. International observers reading the English version worked with a document measurably more horizontal than the one that actually governed. The FDC shows the smallest divergence in the corpus, only 3 points. Its drafters appear to have consciously attacked the vertical defaults of Burmese political vocabulary. That the gap narrowed is measurable evidence that the linguistic work this article advocates can actually succeed.

The scores do not settle the argument; they quantify it. Six findings emerge from the comparison.

First, no constitutional document in the corpus scores above 3 on verb grammar. The only documents that break through are compacts: Manerplaw (4) and Panglong (3). Constitutional genre appears inherently resistant to horizontal verb grammar. Constitutions prescribe. Compacts agree. The English ‘shall’ and the Burmese *pyatthannein* are equally vertical. Whether a document can be constitutionally authoritative and grammatically horizontal remains the unsolved problem of Myanmar’s federal drafting.

Second, the pronoun dimension carries the largest single divergence across every bilingual document. The *kya-naw-toh* problem – the polite collective ‘we’ that means ‘we, the royal servants’ – is the single most consequential lexical choice in Burmese constitutional drafting. The FDC’s break from *kya-naw-toh* to *Do* reduced the pronoun gap from 2 to 1. Half the divergence on that dimension closed with a single word.

Third, the trajectory is not linear. The Dobama declarations of the 1930s score 3.25 in Burmese. The 1947 Constitution that followed scores 2.13. The 1974 and 2008 Constitutions score 1.00. The ethnic state drafts score 2.75–3.00. The FDC scores 3.63. The pattern is horizontal aspiration, then vertical capture, then horizontal recovery. The Dobama opened grammatical space that the post-independence constitutions closed. The resistance movements did not invent horizontality. They recovered it, building on traditions that the ethnic nationality organizations had maintained continuously since Manerplaw.

Fourth, the two military constitutions score identically on every dimension, in both languages. The change from socialist to military-capitalist ideology altered the stated political philosophy without altering the vertical encoding of the constitutional text. The hierarchy is structural and linguistic, not ideological. The *-daw* suffix, the *khwint* rights vocabulary, and the prescriptive verb grammar serve any regime that rules from above, regardless of what it claims to believe.

The clearest demonstration is lexical. The BSPP’s parliamentary chamber was the Pyithu Hluttaw (ပြည်သူ့လွှတ်တော်): the people’s parliament. But *hluttaw* carries the royal *-daw* suffix in its final syllable — the same sacral marker that elevates the state to *naingnandaw* and the military to *tatmadaw*. A socialist legislature, constitutionally committed to abolishing feudal hierarchy, named itself the people’s royal-court. This was not hypocrisy. It was the structural constraint of literary Burmese, which had no available word for

‘parliament’ without that connotation. The 2008 Constitution kept the same name, the same suffix, and the same constraint. The ideology changed; the chamber did not. One distinction is worth noting without being overstated: the 2008 preamble describes ‘an enduring Constitution’ — language absent from 1974 — and its amendment mechanism embeds a Tatmadaw veto that the 1974 mechanism did not. Both differences point toward greater finality in 2008. Neither alters the scores, since both texts position the constitution as settled authority rather than provisional compact, but the structural hardening in 2008 is real.

Fifth, the two highest-scoring documents in the corpus are compacts: Manerplaw (4.25 in English) and the FDC (4.00). The ethnic state drafts, which are constitutions, score lower (3.25–3.50) despite their horizontal political intentions. Genre constrains register. A document that calls itself a *patin-nyin* or *thabawtunyigyek* will tend toward more horizontal language than one that calls itself a constitution. The genre-word chosen at the outset shapes the linguistic register of the entire document. Drafters who begin by choosing between *sadan*, *sagyok*, *patin-nyin*, and *phwei-zon-pon* are making the most consequential decision they will face.

Sixth, the bilingual divergence tells a story about observation itself. Every document scored higher in English than in Burmese. The gap is not random. It follows from the fact that English constitutional vocabulary – ‘rights,’ ‘citizen,’ ‘state’ – has already been stripped of its feudal origins through centuries of republican usage, while Burmese equivalents retain theirs. International observers, scholars, and diplomats who read Myanmar’s constitutional documents in English translation encounter a polity measurably more horizontal than the one Burmese readers inhabit. The 1947 Constitution, whose divergence is the highest in the corpus, illustrates this most starkly. Article 452 of the 2008 Constitution makes this consequential rather than merely descriptive: interpretation ‘shall be based only on the Myanmar text.’ The more horizontal English version has no legal standing. International observers are reading a document that does not govern.

These patterns quantify the argument that runs through this article. Burmese political vocabulary carries a vertical default that operates below the level of conscious choice. The default is not absolute. It can be reduced. The FDC proves this. But it cannot yet be eliminated, because the vocabulary of horizontal obligation – the verbs, pronouns, and rights-words that would encode mutual binding among equals – does not yet exist in established Burmese legal usage. It must be constructed. The ethnic nationality organizations, working in *thabawtunyigyek* traditions since Manerplaw, have been constructing it for three decades. The task now is for that construction to migrate from the ethnic periphery to the centre. Such migration has precedents in the history of political language.

The bilingual divergence documented across the corpus measures more than a translation problem. It measures the distance between a political world in which harm is nameable, assignable, and resistible, and one in which it is not. Horizontal political vocabulary — rights as entitlements rather than permissions, obligation as mutual rather than downward, consent as an act of autonomous will rather than a convergence of inner dispositions — constructs the conceptual infrastructure that makes resistance legible to

itself. When that vocabulary is systematically verticalised in translation, the loss is not merely rhetorical. The concepts required to name what is being done, to assign responsibility for it, and to formulate a claim against it become structurally harder to reach. A population formed by verticalised political language does not simply lack words for horizontal relations. It loses the habitual cognitive pathways along which horizontal political demands travel. Objectors find themselves not only opposed by force but operating in a linguistic environment that processes their claims as category errors rather than demands. The military's documented semantic counter-offensives — the insertion of *tawun* (duty) into resistance slogans, the capture of *pyidaungsu* for the unitary state — are legible in this light not merely as propaganda but as operations on the cognitive availability of horizontal political imagination. The asymmetry is structural and cumulative: the regime drafts with the grain of the language; the resistance cuts across it at every clause.

The federalism literature on Myanmar asks which communities should have states, how powers should divide between levels of government, and which languages deserve official recognition. It does not ask whether the documentary and linguistic tools exist to encode the horizontal relations that federal compacts require. That question is what the bilingual divergence measures.

Anderson's definition of the nation as 'a deep horizontal comradeship' is the single most-cited passage in the nation-building literature. The Burmese rendering of that passage in Loh Kok Wah's bilingual working paper (2026) drops 'horizontal' entirely, substituting သေတူရှင်ဖက်။ ရဲဘော်ရဲဘက် (*thay-tu-shin-bet, yay-baw-yay-bet*), comrades in life-and-death, comrades in courage. The structural claim that the nation requires equality among strangers reaches its Burmese readers as affective solidarity, not horizontal standing. In the same paper, 'self-determination' is rendered as ကိုယ်ပိုင်ပြဏ်ခွင့် (*koyin-pain pyit-tan-khin*), own-decreeing-permission, and 'we decide' becomes an act of granting permission downward. The language does not resist these concepts. It absorbs them into its vertical defaults so completely that neither author nor translator notices the transformation.

The same grammar operates on the most famous sentence about equality in world literature. Thakin Ba Thaung's 1951 Burmese translation of Orwell's *Animal Farm* (Ba Thaung 1951) renders 'all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others' faithfully, yet the comparative mechanism reveals what English conceals. 'More equal than others' requires ဖက် (*htet*), literally 'above': to ask whether equality holds, Burmese must place the compared party in a position glossed as 'above.' The question of equality can only be posed through the architecture of hierarchy. Ba Thaung titled the book ခြေလေးချောင်းတော်လှန်ရေး, 'The Four-Legged *Tawhlanye*', rendering Orwell's allegory about revolution's self-betrayal through the very word that encodes vertical overturning. The translator was himself a Thakin, a founding member of the Dobama Asiayone, the movement that reclaimed 'master' for Burmese nationals without dismantling mastery as a political relation. Nothing in the translation is wrong. Everything in the grammar confirms the thesis.

The companion guide, *Writing Horizontal Compacts*, extends the corpus to twenty-one texts and adds two further findings. The seventh documents how post-2021 Bamar-majority governance documents reproduce vertical defaults almost as completely as the

centre they oppose — the Sagaing Federal Unit Interim Constitution scores 2.88 in English and 2.13 in Burmese, comparable to the 1947 Constitution, not to the Federal Democracy Charter — while PAT policy documents, using a lighter genre-form, score 3.63 and 3.50, the smallest bilingual divergence in the corpus. The eighth finding notes that horizontal compact-making capacity is alive at the ethnic periphery but that the periphery is now itself fragmented: intra-periphery compacts are as difficult as centre-periphery ones. Both findings confirm the central argument: the documentary genre chosen at the outset shapes the register of the entire text, and horizontal encoding must be constructed deliberately at every scale.

The vertical default operates at the level of individual political concepts, not merely at the level of documentary genre. The companion guide (Table 10, Section 38) tests twenty-one concepts that are structurally horizontal in English against their standard Burmese translations. Seventeen default to vertical readings. Rights becomes permission (ahkwín). Democracy becomes covering (okchok). Accountability becomes burden-bearing upward. Sovereignty becomes confinement-power. Even class solidarity, the foundational horizontal concept of leftist politics, arrives as ‘people of the same rank arranged evenly in their allotted row’: horizontality premised on the vertical distribution it cannot escape. Three concepts survive translation intact. The permission-based vocabulary for rights (Section 20) runs continuously from the 1948 Burmese UDHR through the 1974 Constitution to the 2008 Constitution. Three regimes, three ideologies, identical grammatical architecture. Each revolution replaced who grants the permissions. None replaced the structure of granting.

The Atlantic Charter’s declarative cascade

The Atlantic Charter shows how declarations cascade across generations, and how universal language, once released, enables appropriations its authors neither intended nor controlled. Roosevelt’s 1941 speech proclaimed four freedoms: freedom of speech, freedom of worship, freedom from want, and freedom from fear. The Atlantic Charter incorporated these, promising peace where all ‘may live out their lives in freedom from fear and want.’ Though Churchill insisted self-determination applied only to Nazi-occupied Europe, universal language created openings (Mazower 2009).

Aung San seized this, interpreting self-determination for Burma.²⁷ This appropriation catalyzed the realignment of the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League to fight alongside the Allies in March 1945. In his January 1946 AFPFL address, Aung San emphasized freedom from fear, encouraging Burma’s Sangha to propagate it, associating it with ‘higher religious freedom’ (Aung San 1971: 28), blending democratic principles with Buddhist concepts and demonstrating that universal declarations gain force via vernacular translation (Houtman 1999: 297-98).

²⁷ In Aung San’s ‘Problems for Burma’s Freedom’ speech (AFPFL 1946), he used the Atlantic Charter to show how colonized peoples could strategically interpret universal declarations to advance liberation.

Aung San Suu Kyi elevated freedom from fear to a central pillar of Myanmar's democracy movement, making it the title of her famous 1991 essay. For her, freedom from fear operates as both means and end: people must 'liberate their own minds from apathy and fear' before building democratic institutions. She characterizes fear as the worst of Buddhism's Four Corruptions (Aung San Suu Kyi 1995), linking fearlessness to Buddhist mental practices.

The cascade demonstrates two things. Universal language made local appropriation possible: Aung San leveraged the Charter regardless of Churchill's aims. Vernacular translation then strengthened uptake: the freedom language gained force precisely because it could be rendered in Burmese without losing its claim.

Yet this cascade had limits. The Bamar centre successfully deployed self-determination against the British but blocked that same logic when ethnic nationalities invoked it for themselves. Churchill's hypocrisy was exposed; its structure was replicated.

The cascade that matters for Myanmar will not flow through Geneva but through Sagaing, not through the Security Council but through village courts and PDF checkpoints. Where the UDHR gained force by descending from international consensus into national implementation, Myanmar's compacts would need to ascend from territorial practice into coordination infrastructure. The *sadan* travels from the PDF checkpoint to the NUG manifesto, gaining binding force not because an international tribunal enforces it but because the actors holding ground recognize it as the source of their own legitimacy. This is a domestic cascade: uptake achieved not through institutional compulsion but through operational utility. What determines whether that uptake occurs is not the declaration's rhetorical force but its documentary architecture — what kind of text it is, what it commits its signatories to, and whether its grammar enacts the equality it claims.

When the DBA declared 'Burma is our country,' they did not merely describe a state of affairs; they enacted linguistic seizure. Frost (2021) argues declarations work as 'word machines' designed to process judgment over time through 'distributed authority': gradual uptake by diverse actors. The 1988 *do ayei* functioned as poetic energy without the word machine; the military's 'Three Main National Causes' functioned as word machine without poetic legitimacy. Success requires both.²⁸

The UDHR's claim that rights are 'inherent' carries theological freight: Holland (2019: 60, 345, 401-402) traces 'inalienable' rights to Christian metaphysics, the doctrine that humans bear God's image and thus possess dignity prior to any political arrangement. This genealogy may resonate with Myanmar's Christian communities, particularly among the Chin and Kachin whose covenant traditions emphasize binding compacts before God. For Buddhist Myanmar, where the self is ultimately illusory (*anatta*) and all phenomena are conditioned, the metaphysics of inherence sits less comfortably. The solution lies in the pragmatics of compact: legitimacy derives from the process of coming together and

²⁸ The theoretical framework for declarations as performative acts draws on Morsink's UDHR research (1999, 2009), Moran's analysis of declarations as nonviolent resistance tools 2011, and Austin's speech act theory 1962.

agreeing, from uptake rather than ontology. The structural advantage is real. A *sagyok* that grounds its authority in the act of mutual recognition rather than in prior theological endowment can be signed by Buddhists, Christians, Muslims, and animists without requiring any party to adopt another's metaphysics. The *sadan* model's theological neutrality is the condition of its cross-community legibility.

When resistance goes unarchived, states write official records (Trouillot 1995). The *sadan* records what the *sagyok* binds: it creates a witness that neither commands nor dissolves into sentiment. The risk of ventriloquism remains: a polished, English-speaking leadership holding the diplomatic front while a vernacular resistance holds the trenches. Unless the *sadan* of the centre accurately reflects the *sagyok* of the periphery, representation remains proxy rather than portrait. The advantage of the *sadan* is precisely that it can be held, contested, and transmitted by those it claims to represent. A chant dissipates; a text persists and can be called to account.

Why declarations now

The military destroys rather than administers, displacing millions, shattering systems, producing daily casualties. ISP-Myanmar's monitoring confirms the junta's effective governance has shrunk substantially since October 2023's Operation 1027 offensive. Resistance forces have established alternative governance in the vacuum. That vacuum is the opening.

What fills it requires documentation. Liberated territories demonstrate coordination, protection protocols, and federal arrangements that challenge centralized rule. These innovations function but need documentation to become transferable beyond the territories where they emerged. Without documented principles, observers default to simplistic narratives. Coordination falters, and innovations remain invisible to those who might adopt them.

The current political fluidity will not last. Resistance actors remain open to new frameworks now; positions calcify as control consolidates. No common command structure exists; coordination mechanisms do, but they lack shared legal frameworks. Multiple actors claim overlapping authority. Without shared standards distinguishing legitimate from arbitrary authority, coordination falters. Compacts provide reference points while actors remain receptive, but this window closes (Ye Myo Hein 2024).

Weber offers a warning that bears on this timing. A community of shared fate forged in war is notoriously unstable once the external enemy is removed (Weber 1978: 908-10). History is littered with confederations that dissolved into factionalism the moment the tyrant fell. To survive the peace, unless the *sagyok* transitions from defensive pact into positive community of interest, it risks dissolving with the junta it was forged to resist. The *sadan* would need to do more than record the revolution; it would need to transmute the shared trauma of the coup into a founding story that places the federation beyond factional renegotiation even when the necessity of mutual defence recedes. If the *sagyok* remains only a war-measure, it will die with the junta; if it becomes the *sadan* of a new moral economy, it may endure.

The objection that ambiguity preserves coalition has force during mobilization. But coalitions held together only by opposition dissolve when that enemy weakens. The void that enables broad alliance during war becomes the vacuum that enables capture after victory. The question is not whether to define but when. The historical pattern shows that definition deferred is definition forfeited.

The historical pattern is consistent: declarations preceded the states they proclaimed. Elite drafting followed grassroots sentiment, but documentation transformed sentiment into institution. These declarations mobilized internal commitment and secured external legitimacy because they articulated principles before the machinery existed to implement them. The text was not a description of achieved governance but a promissory note that kept the coalition intact through years of war and uncertainty.

Myanmar is currently in its Atlantic Charter phase. The resistance is an alliance of diverse actors united by a common enemy but divided by long-term goals. A binding compact issued now functions as an advance commitment that holds the coalition together through the fog of war. If the resistance waits for military victory to draft its compact, it risks the fate of 1948: a fragmented peace where the absence of a pre-agreed structure allowed the military to step in as sole guarantor of order.

The distinction between mid-conflict and post-victory compacts matters structurally. Mid-conflict compacts prioritize legitimation and mobilization over administrative precision, employing aspirational language to hold together disparate coalitions. They function as what Eleanor Roosevelt called ‘bugle calls’ meant to recruit believers rather than as purely legal instruments. Post-victory documents face different risks: constitutions imposed by experts after liberation are often perceived as signs of defeat rather than founding acts, their authority easily contested. Arendt (1963) observed that many revolutions fail because the turmoil of liberation defeats the quieter second stage of foundation, allowing power to be captured by reactionary forces.

Mid-conflict compacts may include what constitutional scholars term ‘poison pills’: concessions securing immediate unity that prove irreconcilable with future stability once the common enemy is removed. The 1947 Constitution’s secession clause functioned precisely this way. Compacts that survive are those canonized into national narrative. Their aspirational language gets reinterpreted continuously into living social contracts.

The Federal Democracy Charter’s value lies not in international recognition, which remains limited, but in its domestic function: it transforms PDF resistance from criminal insurgency into constitutional defence, providing the moral framework necessary for the Bamar public to sustain protracted war against their own military. The Charter matters now because it is being operationalized in liberated territories, not because it has been written.

Yet the Charter’s persistence depends on more than operationalization. China’s direct negotiations with the Brotherhood Alliance over border infrastructure, bypassing both the SAC and the NUG, illustrate how external actors already recognize territorial reality over constitutional claims (ISP-Myanmar 2024d). The FDC may provide the moral umbrella, but operational authority lies with those who hold ground. The Charter becomes binding *sagyok* only when those who hold territory grant each other interpretive standing, when

the TNLA, KNU, AA, and other armed actors recognize it not as the NUG's manifesto but as their shared compact.

The resistance's governance practices are real, but they remain vulnerable without the documentary act that renders them legible as constitutional principle rather than ad hoc expedient. Documentation does not merely record what practice has achieved; it transforms practice into precedent, expedient into entitlement, coordination into compact.

Declarations fail through dismissal, capture, or corruption — and Myanmar's history supplies a case study for each.

The Gandhi Hall Declaration demonstrates the limits of moral witness against pure coercion. As detailed above, SLORC monitored resistance documentary activity and pre-empted the NLD's gathering with Declaration 1/90, nullifying the elected representatives' demand before they could assemble. The NLD's own genre choice compounded the vulnerability: the Declaration was titled and framed as a *kwei nya gyet*, the genre of sovereign proclamation, so its authority structure flowed downward regardless of what the text said. SLORC needed only to contest who held the sovereign position, not the documentary form itself. Against a regime willing to anticipate documentary resistance in advance, a *sadan* became a paper shield.

The so-called Blueprint for a Free Burma (1941) illustrates capture — a more insidious failure than dismissal. The document, attributed to the young Aung San but likely dictated by Japanese officers, advocated 'one nation, one party, one leader' in terms fundamentally at odds with Aung San's mature democratic commitments. Yet it was published by the Psychological Warfare Directorate in 1957 and deployed by Dr Maung Maung to provide historical precedent for military rule (Houtman 2007). This represents what Frost (2021) terms 'dark ventriloquism': whereas a genuine declaration appropriates the voice of the people to liberate them, the Blueprint appropriated the voice of Aung San to silence them. Intellectual production that lacks distributed authority and continuous interpretation by co-equals remains vulnerable. Those who command both the archives and the apparatus of coercion can capture it.

The ceasefires of the 1990s offer a third pattern: the anti-*sagyok*. Those agreements functioned as compacts binding actors through private concession rather than public principle. The military exchanged political silence for economic access, granting ceasefire groups control over jade mines, teak forests, and border gates (Crouch 2019: 14–17).²⁹ The resulting arrangement was feudal warlordism dressed as peace. Text said 'ceasefire'; ground said 'extraction.' When the regime no longer needed quiescence, it revoked the

²⁹ Crouch documents the structural outcome of this arrangement as a 'Look to Naypyidaw' dynamic: Zone status, rather than consolidating lateral authority between ethnic groups, compelled each group to maintain ongoing dependency on the centre for recognition, resources, and the continuation of its concessions (Crouch 2015: 21). This is the constitutional form of the same vertical recapture the article traces in the grammar of obligation: recognition written into the 2008 Constitution was designed to channel ethnic nationality political energy upward, not to inscribe horizontal obligations between equals.

bargain (Woods 2011). The lesson for any contemporary *sagyok* is clear: it would need to specify economic mechanisms that bind, not merely political principles that inspire.

Survivorship bias haunts any catalogue of successful declarations. Biafra and Katanga both possessed elaborate constitutional texts and substantial territorial control: Biafra's secession from Nigeria (1967-70) ended in military reconquest; Katanga's breakaway from the Congo (1960-63) ended in UN-enforced reintegration despite sustained international support. Text and territory were not enough (Heerten & Moses 2014; Larmer & Kennes 2014). The Federal Democracy Charter becomes founding law only if the resistance prevails; otherwise it becomes evidence in a junta tribunal. These are the stakes against which the following objections should be read — not as reasons to abandon the documentary project but as conditions it must satisfy.

Theoretical objections

A Realist objection warrants acknowledgement. Taylor (2009) argues that political order in Myanmar has historically depended on centralized state capacity rather than consensual arrangement. The resistance may possess immense *awza* (moral authority) but struggles to convert it into legitimate *ana* (command); from this perspective, *sadan* without *ana* appears naive.³⁰

Yet the military's reliance on pure coercion has eroded the very capacity Taylor prizes. By destroying the social fabric required for governance, *kyei nya gyet*, backed by *amein*, has rendered the centre ungovernable. The SAC's conscription law reflects desperation, not sovereign strength. Taylor's historical pattern operated under conditions of limited communication and agricultural extraction economies. The resistance coordinates through technologies unavailable to Konbaung consolidators. Whether these enable stable federation remains to be demonstrated, but the assumption that Myanmar must replicate its pre-modern political geometry requires justification.

A Hobbesian objection follows: without a sovereign to adjudicate disputes, what prevents the *sagyok* from dissolving the moment interests diverge? But horizontal compacts do not inevitably degenerate without a centralised enforcer. The Swiss Confederation has maintained stability for seven centuries through binding compact enforced by mutual vulnerability rather than sovereign command. To argue that Myanmar requires a Leviathan is to confuse a specific historical habit with a universal political law.

Weber analysed such arrangements. His study of the *Eidgenossenschaft* (sworn confederation) examined how medieval Swiss cantons and city leagues maintained

³⁰ Taylor's scholarship does not engage with Buddhist practice as political action. He cites Jordt (2007) and Rozenberg (2010) but not Houtman (1999: 231 and passim), which directly challenged his statist framework by demonstrating that meditation functions as political practice. Following Lintner, Taylor (2012) dismisses Aung San Suu Kyi's argument for spiritual revolution as mysticism and not the stuff of hard-headed political realism, and characterizes U Nu's meditation as obstructing administration. Yet he treats Ne Win's late-life Vipassana practice with respect, recording it as a sincere search for relief. The double standard is revealing: democratic leaders who practised meditation are romantics; the dictator who repressed them is a serious student of Buddhism.

compacts without centralized sovereignty (Weber 1978: 1248-59). Enforcement operated horizontally: breach of compact risked expulsion from the alliance, an existential threat for any polity dependent on mutual defence and trade. The ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar have developed comparable mechanisms. KNU, KIO, and TNLA governance relies not on a monopoly of violence but on networks of obligation: reciprocal aid agreements, joint military operations, and shared economic interests in border regions. The penalty for breach is not prison but ostracism from the compact. Weber noted that such multi-headed leagues were historically stabilized by external threats (Weber 1978: 1204, 1324); the *sagyok* is a community of shared fate that binds diverse actors against a common predator.

Scott (2009) raises a different objection. Highland peoples historically maintained deliberate illegibility as resistance to lowland state capture. Written records enabled censuses, taxes, and conscription; to be documented was to be ruled. If this analysis holds, insisting on textual compacts may replicate the very state-making technology that highland communities fled.

The defence is that the revolutionary *sadan* differs structurally from the census or the tax roll. It is not a tool of central legibility (the state seeing peoples) but of mutual legibility (peoples seeing each other). A *sagyok* does not render communities visible to a centre that might exploit them; it renders communities visible to one another as co-equal parties to a covenant. The horizontal compact binds the centre as firmly as the periphery, foreclosing the asymmetric extraction that made illegibility a rational refuge.

But illegibility has a shelf life. A movement that remains illegible to the state also remains illegible to the peoples it seeks to govern. How can a revolutionary movement claim authority without articulating what it stands for, what it promises, what binds its constituent parts? Illegibility works as resistance; it cannot work as governance. The question is not whether to become legible but to whom and on what terms. And the answer, in the current moment, is visible in the behaviour of the communities Scott's framework was built to describe. The Zomian organizations — KNU, KIO, CNF, TNLA — who maintained deliberate illegibility through decades of highland resistance are now the systematic producers of written constitutions, land policies, court judgments, and codified governance. The Karenni State Interim Arrangement, the Chinland Constitution, the Ta'ang State Constitution: these are highland communities performing inscription, building documentary authority from a tradition of horizontal governance rather than tributary command. Highland communities chose illegibility when writing served the state against them. They are choosing inscription now that writing can serve horizontal compact-making among equals. The question of whether to accept this distinction is one they have already answered.

A federalism literature objects that encouraging ethnic armed organizations to produce their own constitutions and documentation before a union compact is signed risks accelerating disintegration rather than preventing it. The literature's key political terms — phederal sanit, dimokreisi, lu nyi zu rights — are transliterations from English, used fluently in Burmese-language scholarship without comment. The borrowing marks the absence of indigenous vocabulary for horizontal political compacts between self-constituting communities: the transliterations are themselves evidence of the structural

gap this article is diagnosing. Roeder's 'institutional weapons' thesis argues that establishing separate institutions, constitutions, and legitimating narratives for ethnic regions is the single biggest predictor of state dissolution: each group locks in non-negotiable 'truths' that raise the transaction costs of future union to prohibitive levels (Erk & Anderson 2009; Roeder 2009). This is the most substantial objection this article faces, because its evidence base is real: South Sudan, Kosovo, and the Soviet successor states all demonstrate how prior ethnic institutionalization can harden into permanent partition.

But the objection assumes a stable centre capable of 'holding together' if only the periphery stopped documenting itself. That centre no longer exists. The ethnic *sadan* are not a new development the resistance should discourage; they have existed continuously since 1947. The Bamar void is the anomaly, not ethnic documentation. The choice facing Myanmar is not between federation and fragmented documentation but between coordinated documentation feeding into a shared *sagyok* and uncoordinated documentation hardening into permanent partition. More importantly, the *sadan* model differs structurally from Roeder's 'institutional weapons' in one critical respect: it establishes protocol for disagreement rather than settlement of disagreement. A *sadan* does not lock in non-negotiable truths; it records achieved governance and creates interpretive standing for the parties who produced it. The transaction cost Roeder identifies rises when documents foreclose future negotiation. *Sadan* is designed to keep negotiation open while making existing achievements legible.

The historical precedent that best illuminates what prior displacement actually does to compact-making is not South Sudan but Plymouth. The Separatists who produced the Mayflower Compact in 1620 were not pioneers who chose frontier conditions; they were dissenters expelled from the institutional space in which their political vocabulary had previously formed. The Mayflower Compact was not planned. It was composed because the settlers' Virginia charter did not cover Plymouth, leaving them without legal standing — and therefore needing to constitute themselves as a self-authorizing body through mutual pledge. Elazar (1987) traced this New England covenant tradition as one of the mechanisms by which compact thinking entered the broader federal tradition. The CDM workers, NUG administrators, and urban professionals displaced to border towns after February 2021 are not Separatists, and Myanmar's multi-ethnic polity has no empty continent to settle — the compact they must build has to accommodate competing sovereignties, not a vacant jurisdiction. But the structural condition is the same: a community expelled from the order that previously granted it institutional authority, discovering that horizontal compact-making is not merely one option among others but the only form of legitimate authority available to people who no longer have a sovereign to appeal to. Prior separate covenant-making, in this light, is not the obstacle to voluntary federation. It is its precondition.

A related objection notes that the proposed arrangement resembles a confederation rather than a federation. Forsyth (1981) confirms that confederations are unstable: they either centralize or dissolve. The objection is valid but misframes the choice. The alternative to unstable confederation is not stable federation but violent reconquest. The Tatmadaw's seven decades of 'holding-together' produced not union but perpetual civil war. A confederation that coordinates difference may prove more durable than a nominal

federation that papers over irreconcilable centralization. The question is not whether confederation is ideal but whether it is preferable to the only available alternative: a centre that lacks the capacity to hold together and a periphery that will not consent to being held.

The most fundamental objection is also the simplest. A political scientist could argue that the grammar is irrelevant: remove it and you still get the same constitution, because the military has guns. If coercive force determines constitutional architecture, then the linguistic analysis is decoration. The answer is not that grammar causes authoritarianism but that grammar determines what horizontal agreements mean when actors dispute them. The 2012 Constitutional Tribunal episode makes this precise: the military did not rewrite a single word to gut the institution. It simply operated in a constitutional culture where no distributed interpretive community existed to defend the Tribunal's horizontal reading. The grammar's failure to embed horizontal political vocabulary across decades meant the institution had no constituency capable of recognizing the legislature's response as the constitutional violation it was.

Three further pieces of evidence run in the same direction. The workshop evidence: resistance workers articulated horizontal principles with fluency in spoken Burmese, but when they moved to written Burmese the register pulled toward cosmological authority regardless of their intent. The friction was structural, not political — the same speakers, the same commitments, a different outcome on paper. The bilingual scoring: every document in the corpus scores more horizontal in English than in Burmese. If military force were the sole cause of hierarchical constitutional architecture, the English texts would be equally vertical; the divergence would not exist. It exists because the language itself is doing work independent of the gun. And the Tatmadaw's own practice: between 1989 and 2010, the military deliberately avoided signing written ceasefires with ethnic armed groups, conducting understandings through oral arrangements and unsigned memoranda. Generals who understood that a signed document between two named parties creates co-equal standing were careful not to produce one. That is not the behaviour of actors indifferent to the grammar of horizontal commitment.

Contemporary risks

The most immediate risk is internal fragmentation between the resistance's own compact-making processes. As noted above, the nine organisations drafting the Articles of Federal Transitional Arrangement have excluded the NUG. The AFTA process enacts precisely the 'strong states, strong union' doctrine this article endorses — but without the Bamar-led body that holds the most visible international mandate. The result is two parallel compact-making processes moving in opposite directions: the NUG drafting from the centre outward, the AFTA coalition drafting from the states inward. The divergence is generic as well as political. The NUG's Transitional Federal Union Constitution Preparatory Draft reverted to *hpwezibon acheihkan ubadei* — the standard constitutional genre-word — while the AFTA coalition produces documents closer to *sadan* form. Revolution produces covenantal vocabulary; governing reverts to constitutional genre. The generic gap may prove as consequential as the political one. If these processes harden into competing constitutional claims before a union *sagyok* is signed, the documentary asymmetry this article diagnoses will reproduce itself in a new form: not Bamar centre versus ethnic

periphery, but Bamar-led NUG versus EAO coalition. The article's argument applies to this fracture directly: the solution is not for one process to absorb the other but for both to treat their emerging documents as *sadan* — authoritative records of achieved governance — that can eventually be brought together into a shared *sagyok*. The window for that convergence is narrowing with each constitutional draft that entrenches incompatible frameworks.

The drive for vernacular uptake can mask a class divide between the globalised rights discourse of urban leadership and the agrarian grievances driving rural resistance. The peasant fighter in Sagaing may care less about federal power-sharing formulas than about land, conscription, and revenge. A compact achieves genuine uptake only when it speaks to these material conditions, not merely translates elite concepts into local idiom. A related tension runs through the armed struggle itself: while resistance documents espouse federal democracy, the operational demands of warfare often require centralised command. The Arakan Army's territorial expansion demonstrates effective *ana*, but governance that emerges from conquest risks replicating the patterns it opposed. The task is ensuring that battlefield imperatives do not become permanent governance, that *sadan* can establish interpretive constraints which discipline *kyei nya gyet*.

A further vulnerability lies in the digital sphere. While social media has democratized the production of text, it has destabilized its authority. In traditional Burmese statecraft, political legitimacy was anchored in the *shwei-daik* (Royal Archive), a physical repository where tax rolls, treaties, and dynastic chronicles were preserved against the flux of time. To control the archive was to control reality (Than Tun 1983-1990). Today, the resistance's documents often exist only as files on foreign-owned platforms subject to algorithmic suppression or deletion. In Burmese vernacular, digital text often registers as *thadin* (news, rumour), fluid and impermanent, rather than *sadan* or *upade* (law), which demand the stability of the written word. The resistance would need to move beyond digital circulation to archival canonization, establishing a protected registry of founding documents.

Mendelson's (1975) study of the Sangha illuminates a further risk, but its precise lesson matters. The sangha's internal governance was horizontal, enforced by the Vinaya's procedural machinery: quorum, ballot, equal standing, and the seven settlement rules (*adhikarana-samatha*) for resolving disputes among members. What fragmented into competing gainings was not the tradition itself but the tradition without that machinery. The Burmese court enforced doctrinal orthodoxy through an ecclesiastical court external to the order; when that court collapsed, competing sects proliferated because no internal arbitration mechanism remained to adjudicate disputes among equals. A *sagyok* among armed actors faces the same structural exposure. The failure mode is not bad faith but absent procedure — which is precisely what the sangha possessed and Myanmar's resistance compacts currently lack. Among the seven settlement rules, one bears most directly on the compact-drafter's situation. The *tinaḍḍvatthāraka* (တိဏဏတ်တရက, covering with grass) procedure provides a formal mutual amnesty for disputes that would otherwise prevent reconciliation — a collective clearing of accumulated offences in which both sides simultaneously lay down their claims without requiring either to admit individual fault. The Vinaya prescribes it specifically for community-wide conflicts where adjudicating each grievance separately would dissolve the assembly before agreement was

possible. A resistance compact that must bring together actors with genuine grievances against one another faces exactly this structural problem. The procedure was suppressed with the rest of the sangha's horizontal machinery; its logic was not.

The 2008 Constitution's Constitutional Tribunal offers no model; it is a creature of the Tatmadaw, not a federal court. Comparative federalism suggests alternatives: Switzerland's Federal Tribunal adjudicates cantonal disputes without imposing central dominance; the European Court of Justice derives authority from treaty signatories rather than sovereign command. The 2012 episode shows what happens without a functional interpretive body. The Tribunal ruled that parliamentary committees were not 'Union level organizations,' a decision that threatened the legislature's ability to check the executive. The Pyidaungsu Hluttaw responded by initiating impeachment proceedings; all nine Tribunal members resigned. The actor with the most power simply removed the referee when it disliked the ruling. A distributed interpretive authority — one whose legitimacy derives from the compact itself rather than from any single signatory — is a structural necessity, not an optional refinement.³¹

Drafting for horizontality

Revenue-sharing addresses the economic foundation without which political federation dissolves into competing extraction. Aung San's promise at Panglong that 'if Burma receives one kyat, you will also get one kyat' articulated this foundation. The Federal Democracy Charter gestures toward resource-sharing but leaves mechanisms unspecified. Who controls the jade revenue from Hpakant? How are timber concessions in Kayin and Kayah allocated? What arrangements govern the tariffs at Myawaddy and Muse?

These questions are not secondary. They concern the very substance of any binding compact. EAO commanders and PDF units assess the Charter's credibility not by its articulation of federal principles but by its answer to the 'One Kyat' question. Until the FDC can specify revenue-sharing mechanisms with binding force, it risks remaining what international observers respect but field commanders treat as aspirational: a *sadan* that has not become a *sagyok*.

Comparative federalism provides models. The 1975 James Bay and Northern Quebec Agreement demonstrates how founding compacts can specify resource mechanisms with binding force: the Cree and Inuit signatories negotiated land rights, revenue settlements, and joint management structures as conditions of the agreement, not as promises for later implementation. Resource-sharing provisions that merely gesture toward eventual benefit lack the binding force that distinguishes *sagyok* from aspiration; they would need to specify allocation mechanisms from the day agreements take force.

The lesson from the historical cases examined above is not that compacts are futile but that their success depends on specific conditions: distributed authority that prevents capture,

³¹ This mechanism need not replicate Western judicial forms. It would function rather as a council of treaty partners: a forum where signatories encounter each other as interpretive equals, where the process of negotiating the compact's meaning holds authority equal to any resulting decision.

territorial presence that provides enforcement, economic substance that binds material interests, and interpretive mechanisms that keep the text alive. A *sadan* backed by these conditions can become a *sagyok*. Without them, it remains vulnerable to the fates that befell the Gandhi Hall Declaration, the Blueprint, and the ceasefire bargains of the 1990s.

The linguistic analysis converges on a set of design requirements. Equality cannot be imported into a *sagyok* through good intentions; it must be built into the text through specific grammatical choices: the plural action marker *-kya* to enforce shared agency, the coordinate conjunction *-yaw...-pa* to refuse implicit hierarchy among signatories, and *kati* (Pali: the willed intention that precedes moral action; a vow that binds the maker) alongside *sagyok* to supply the moral weight the word's etymology withholds. These are not stylistic preferences but structural requirements: without them, the *sagyok* remains what its root promises — a binding, not necessarily among equals.

UDHR drafters insisted on text 'readily understood by the ordinary man and woman' rather than just 'philosophers and jurists' (Morsink 1999: 37). Accessibility was strategic: the UDHR succeeded because diverse communities could translate its principles into their own contexts. Contemporary Myanmar compacts face a comparable design challenge: they need language precise enough to distinguish inclusion from oppression yet capacious enough for diverse communities to recognize their aspirations without erasing difference.

Myanmar's *do ayei* revolution, approaching five years post-coup, is within the historical window when compacts gain legitimacy through validation of resistance rather than direction of it.

The UDHR was drafted over nearly two years involving 56 countries and more than 150 meetings; consensus came from shared moral revulsion to barbarous acts, not abstract philosophy (Morsink 1999: 37). Non-Western architects shaped the language directly: P.C. Chang of China insisted the UDHR be 'eclectic,' successfully adding 'conscience' alongside 'reason' in Article 1 to reflect Confucian emphasis on *ren* (Schabas 2013). His success demonstrated that universal declarations need not impose a single philosophical tradition when drafting includes diverse voices. For Myanmar, *sadan* can unite diverse communities by articulating shared moral responses to oppression rather than seeking theological consensus.

The authority question is not merely philosophical. A compact that opens by asserting transcendent moral truths — universal human dignity, the inherent right of peoples to self-determination — has already made a structural concession: it grounds its legitimacy in a claim that stands above the signatories rather than between them. Whoever subsequently controls enforcement inherits interpretive authority over what that higher principle requires. The UDHR's thirty articles of specific obligation are what prevent its preamble from functioning as a blank cheque for whoever holds power. Myanmar's resistance compacts face the same risk in a more acute form: the *brahma vihara* vocabulary the workshop participants reached for, precisely because it escapes the vertical loop, also escapes the specificity of named obligation. *Metta* extended to all beings cannot be bounded to named parties without ceasing to be what it is. A *sagyok* requires the opposite movement: grounding authority not in what stands above the signatories but in the act of coming together itself.

True uptake requires polyphonic translation: federalism rendered legible through Buddhist *dhamma*, Christian covenant theology, and indigenous cosmologies of land stewardship. The Kachin concept of *ga shaka* — covenant, drawn from the Baptist missionary tradition introduced through the American Baptist Mission from the 1870s — provides a binding mechanism grounded in covenant theology that carries more horizontal force in Kachin-speaking communities than any Burmese transliteration could. A multilingual *sagyok* that draws on each language's strongest horizontal resources will reach the checkpoint and the village meeting where a document written only in the register of international human rights law will not.

Compacts gain durability through institutional embedding. When ethnic armed organisations issue formal responses, when humanitarian bodies adopt them as assessment frameworks, when they inform constitutional negotiations, compacts become coordination infrastructure rather than aspiration. Actors adopt them because they help coordinate, not because they are commanded. Institutionally embedded declarations function as living documents whose meanings evolve through use (Morsink 2009: 281; Schabas 2013: xxviii). Military proclamations (*kyei nya gyet*), backed by executive order (*amein*), impose fixed meanings; *sadan* achieves influence through dynamic interpretation (Diller 2011: 459). For that interpretation to remain horizontal, the compact itself must constitute the interpretive body: an authority whose legitimacy derives from the agreement of all signatories, not from appointment by any single one.

Compacts and their engineers

The documentary act is not incidental to revolutionary success but constitutive of it. The Atlantic Charter of 1941, drafted while Britain faced invasion, preceded any Allied victory; it functioned as a promissory note whose moral authority bound the signatories to commitments they would otherwise have abandoned. Compacts that float as aspirations without binding their authors dissolve into what Burmese political culture calls *seithdat* — a remembered spirit whose binding force has evaporated, the name invoked by all, the obligation honoured by none.

The binding text that converts alliances into obligations the parties can hold each other to across time is still missing. In Sagaing Region, villages under fire have built governance structures, collective security systems, and reciprocal funding mechanisms that hold communities together under active bombardment (Houtman, Lodge & Vaddhanaphuti 2025). These are sustained by shared threat and pre-existing social capital, not by any written instrument that would bind the parties once the threat recedes. The practical consequence is visible in the governance of exile. The National Unity Government faces criticism from all sides — not primarily for incompetence but for the absence of any framework that would make its obligations transparent and its accountability enforceable. Without a compact specifying what each party owes the others, every resource allocation appears arbitrary, every exclusion a betrayal. The criticism is not a failure of one government. It is what governance without binding compact produces. The founding chant of the Civil Disobedience Movement itself defines the collective through refusal — 'Don't go into the office, walk straight out!' — not through mutual obligation.

The vocabulary revolution traced above in pre-revolutionary France had a further dimension. The emergence of the social sciences gave European political thought a register for horizontal obligation that Burmese political vocabulary never developed. Social science, from Montesquieu's comparative institutional analysis through Rousseau's *contrat social* to Durkheim's study of solidarity itself, was the engineering tool a vertical political culture produced to conceive of lateral obligation. The compact required a science of society before society could compact with itself.

Myanmar's resistance has neither. Buddhist intellectual culture produces extraordinary sophistication about the individual mind, moral causation, and cosmological order. Thakin Kodaw Hmaing was convinced that collective mental purity would produce national prosperity without institutional machinery. Ba Maw presented Aung San as Bo Bo Aung, the *weikza* engaged in *htwekyakpauk* — the revolutionary as transcendent spiritual figure, not as signatory to a binding agreement. The operating assumption is that right interior orientation produces right political order: achieve harmony with the cosmological architecture, and the compact becomes unnecessary. It does not. Ne Win seized power in 1962 and subjected Burma's population to over three decades of authoritarian rule — forced labour, economic collapse, the suppression of every institution capable of horizontal self-organization. In retirement, he turned to Ledi Sayadaw's meditation techniques and numerological practice, eventually denigrating the relevance of his own revolution as trivial compared to spiritual transformation. A man who had tortured a country in the name of political order concluded that political order was beside the point.

He never used his revolution to build a lasting horizontal compact because, in the value system he inhabited, such a compact was not the highest form of achievement. Ledi Sayadaw's tradition had itself been a horizontal revolution of access: making vipassana available to laypeople, breaking the monastic monopoly on meditative practice. But the democratization of spiritual technique did not generate any corresponding democratization of political documentary practice. Ne Win absorbed Ledi's horizontal opening in one register and used it to reinforce the vertical default in another. The pattern repeats across Myanmar's leadership: U Nu ordained as a monk; Than Shwe channelled state resources into pagoda construction; Aung San Suu Kyi made vipassana meditation the foundation of her political philosophy — a revolution of the spirit that remained her framework even after release from house arrest. Leaders who wielded or sought horizontal political power did not codify their achievements in binding documents for successors; they reframed their legacies through vertical soteriological acts, dedicating themselves upward to the dhamma rather than outward to a political community. Their 'we' never extended horizontally. Trapped in a vertical universe where the highest-status act is self-dedication to the sangha, they were not merely inattentive to the footwork required to build a social compact among equals — they were structurally ill-equipped to recognize it as the task.

Just as marriage and social reproduction carry no soteriological weight in Theravada Buddhist culture — respected but not merit-generating, celebrated but not sacred — so the political compact between equals remains a mundane act in a value system where the highest-status documentary form is self-dedication to the sangha. The *setkya min* prophecy, the personality cults from Aung San to Aung San Suu Kyi, the conviction that the right

leader will set things right — all express what a political culture produces when it has no mechanism for horizontal self-binding. If the collective cannot constitute itself through mutual obligation, it can only constitute itself through shared allegiance to an extraordinary individual. Aung San expressed his idea of national unity as all contributing a brick to building a pagoda. However, a movement that knows where it wants to go but has not studied how compacts are built is like an architect who can draw the pagoda but has never learned how to mix mortar. The vision is clear. The binding agent is missing. The chant finds its leader. The compact still awaits its engineers.

This article identifies what the mortar is, why Burmese political culture has not produced it, and where the ingredients can be found.

But the engineers are not absent from Myanmar. They are working at its periphery. Ethnic nationality organizations have maintained continuous compact-making traditions since 1947 — from Panglong through the 1961 Federal Proposal to the Limbin and KIO constitutions — building precisely the institutional machinery the Bamar centre lacks. The 2021 displacement that drove Bamar professionals into ethnic borderlands created an unprecedented encounter: those who know how to administer a state meeting those who know how to bind one. The *sagyok* does not need to be imported. It needs to cross the internal border that has separated chanting from compacting for seven decades.

Whether the periphery's compact-making capacity rests on a different conceptual vocabulary for political change, or merely on different political circumstances, is a question the evidence assembled here raises without resolving. If Bamar revolutionary vocabulary is structurally vertical — oriented toward inversionary overturning — then communities that sustained continuous compact-making may have drawn on a different orientation altogether, one directed toward mutual binding rather than the replacement of an apex. The bilingual ethnic nationality constitutions, which commit to horizontal principles in English and must then render them in Burmese grammar, provide a natural test case for separate analysis.

Conclusion

This article has traced a structural problem. The rallying cry *do ayei* fuses cause and inscription in the moment of utterance, but Burmese separates them the moment pen meets paper. Inscription has bound persons vertically for a thousand years: Pagan stone records constituted slaves (*kyun*), royal orders constituted *ahmudan*, constitutional articles constituted *naingantha* and *taingyintha*. A *sagyok* repurposes the same documentary act for a different relationship: it inscribes persons not vertically, as servants of a sovereign, but horizontally, as signatories to each other.

The chant is not a primitive form awaiting its translation into written compact. It is the compact's content, held in oral suspension by a community whose documentary acts have been systematically captured, pre-empted, or pulled vertical at the moment of inscription. The regime that controls the archive also controls the silence around the chant: *do ayei* names, in the only form available to it, precisely what inscription would need to preserve.

The 1988 protesters performed *ayei-ahtun* but never produced *ayei-atha*: they mobilized the crisis but could not perform the inscription, because the literary register that writing activates is the register the military had already claimed as its own; because the archive in which any inscription would be deposited was held by the entity they were chanting against; and because whatever language the resistance did produce, the military absorbed rather than suppressed, converting protest vocabulary into constitutional architecture within a single political generation. The military exploited not a gap but a closed loop it had deliberately maintained.

Today's resistance has reclaimed the chant. Whether it can produce the inscription — the binding text that holds a coalition together after the common enemy is gone — is the question this article has tried to answer. The border workshop participants who coined *gadi sagyok* demonstrated that horizontal inscription is achievable, but only through deliberate assembly against the grain of every available term.

The answer is: not yet, and the reasons are structural. When speakers write in Burmese, the language pulls upward toward cosmological authority. This article has identified six reinforcing impediments to the emergence of *sagyok* in the political sphere. Each is distinct. Together they express a single structural condition: Burmese political culture defaults to the individual as the unit of revolutionary agency, and the *sagyok* requires a collective one.

When the collective does form, it forms around identity. The ego-radiating structure of *do* means that every 'we' in Burmese is anchored in a particular self whose social coordinates determine who belongs. The available selves are ethnic, religious, or familial. No grammatical mechanism exists for constituting a 'we' whose membership is determined by the act of agreement rather than by the identity of the speaker. The chant produces shared feeling across ethnic lines; it does not produce a shared political subject. That subject can only be constituted by the documentary act the chant has not yet generated: a *sagyok* in which signing, not identity, determines belonging.

The 'we' that does not yet exist in Burmese is the same 'we' that did not yet exist in French in 1789 or in Arabic in 2011. Derrida was right that the people in whose name a declaration speaks do not exist before the declaration brings them into being. But he assumed the language could carry the people it would constitute. In Burmese it cannot. The declaration brings a collective into being, but the grammar constrains what kind of collective the text can perform: a slave-we that submits, or an ego-radiating we that defaults to the identity of whoever chants loudest. The founding act does not merely lack authorization. It lacks a vessel.

Searle was equally right that declarations bring about the state of affairs they represent. The difficulty is that in Burmese, what the written text performs is shaped by the grammar regardless of the drafter's intent. Drafters at the border workshop conceived horizontal obligation fluently in speech. The literary register that writing activates performed hierarchy in spite of them. The state of affairs the declaration brings about is the one the grammar enacts: hierarchy, not the equality the drafter intended.

First, the sacral confinement of the political domain. *Sagyok* functioned for centuries in commercial life: debt contracts, mortgages, land transactions. But the political sphere was

the king's preserve, sacralized through *taw*. The military inherited this exclusion intact. *Tatmadaw*, *hluttaw*, *naingandaw* — the institutions carry the royal-sacred suffix, marking the political domain as belonging to the sovereign, not to the citizenry. Commercial *sagyok* was never suppressed because it never threatened sovereign authority. The barrier is not the absence of horizontal documentary technology but its confinement to the non-political domain.

Second, the grammatical default to hierarchy. Burmese encodes status before any utterance can begin. The pronoun system requires speakers to calibrate rank (*kyunaw* = 'royal slave I'); the giving vocabulary splinters into eight hierarchical registers; conjunctions encode asymmetry (*hnin* = 'accompanied by,' implying a primary actor); the literary register that activates when pen meets paper pulls every sentence upward toward cosmological authority. The horizontal particles exist — *-kya* for shared agency, *-yaw...-pa* for coordinate conjunction — but they must be deliberately assembled against the grammatical current. The catch-22 is sharpest at the level of the pronoun. *Nga*, the one pronoun that encodes equality, cannot be written; it exists in colloquial speech alone. The literary register that activates the moment pen meets paper supplies only the slave-I: *kyanaw*, *kyama*. The act of writing a compact automatically reinstates the hierarchy the compact is trying to escape. Every other element of the vertical grammar can in principle be worked around with horizontal particles. The pronoun cannot, because the horizontal pronoun does not exist in the medium a compact requires.

Third, the soteriological orientation inward. Buddhist political culture produces vertical inscription — binding oneself to a pagoda, a sovereign, the dhamma — and individual moral qualification for governance (the Manugye's *samadhi* benches, the triad of *thila*, *thamadi*, *panna*). The revolution it generates most naturally is the inward conquest of appetite — the Singhasura inscription's 'rebellion against slavery to appetite.' Revolution conceived as individual moral refusal does not require a compact between equals. It requires only the refusal itself. The Western revolutionary tradition, for all its failures, at least presupposes a collective agent: a people, a class, a nation. The Burmese revolutionary tradition presupposes an individual one. What the political register, the soteriological register, and the grammatical register share is a common axis: revolution as movement along the vertical, whether overturning a sovereign, purifying a mind, or freeing oneself from a pronoun that encodes servitude. The first three impediments are not parallel but expressions of a single structural orientation that compact-making must work against. Ne Win, having performed *tawhlanyei* in both registers, confirmed the priority: the man who had wielded more political power than any Burmese leader since the kings concluded that the spiritual revolution was the only one that mattered.

Fourth, the absence of a sacralizing mechanism for the horizontal. Throne and altar sacralized vertical authority for centuries. Nothing equivalent sacralizes the horizontal 'we.' When workshop participants reached for vocabulary to express mutual obligation, they defaulted to *metta* and *dhamma* — Buddhist sublime states that flow universally and therefore resist being bound to named parties in a legal contract. The cosmological architecture of numbered symmetries (Three Jewels, Four Noble Truths) provides scaffolding for state slogans (Three Causes, Twelve Objectives) but no equivalent structure for mutual obligation between co-equals. The *sagyok* has no cosmological warrant.

Fifth, the systematic co-option of horizontal vocabulary. The military does not suppress horizontal language. It absorbs it. *Do ayei* appears six times in the 2008 Constitution. The 24-member Committee for Writing Slogans for Nationals converted protest chants into state commands. The Dobama's colloquial *do* was corrected back to the literary *to*; the intimate *nga* was replaced by *kyundaw* ('royal slaves we'); *Bama* was legislated into *Myanmar*. Every term the resistance coins is captured and re-inscribed in the vertical register. The vocabulary of liberation becomes the vocabulary of control within a single political generation.

Sixth, the documentary asymmetry. The capacity for *sagyok* exists, but where it exists, political power is weakest. The Bamar centre chants but does not document. The tools for horizontal inscription exist on the periphery, not at the centre.

The mechanism runs deeper than lexical substitution. *Loktha pyithu* (လုပ်သားပြည်သူ, 'working people') and *taingyintha pyithu* (တိုင်းရင်းသားပြည်သူ, 'national-races people') are grammatically identical constructions. The qualifying noun changed entirely between 1974 and 2008; the political philosophy changed; the stated ideology changed. The grammatical structure did not. In both constitutions, an institution above the people defines which people count. The BSPP decided who was a genuine working person; the SPDC decided which communities belonged to the 135-group taxonomy. The mechanism of exclusion is the same even though the excluded groups differ. A drafter who substitutes a new qualifying noun — ethnic nationalities, citizens of the revolution, peoples of the federal union — without changing who holds the authority to define it reproduces the same structure. The problem is not the noun. It is who holds the definitional power.

For objectors to the regime, this mechanism is not incidental but load-bearing. The chant sustains solidarity under pressure precisely because it requires no horizontal vocabulary — it is performative, collective, and pre-linguistic in its force. The moment objectors attempt to convert that solidarity into a written compact, they enter the linguistic terrain where the vertical default operates. The argument dissolves not because it is wrong but because the language in which it must be made has already distributed the available positions.

The drafter's task is assembly, not recovery: no political term claimed as horizontal survives stress-testing without qualification, but cracked pieces can be combined so that the cracks do not align. These six layers reinforce each other. But the *sagyok* addresses all six simultaneously. Against sacral confinement, it extends horizontal binding from commerce into the political sphere that taw has monopolized. Against the grammatical default, it assembles the horizontal particles deliberately against the current. Against soteriological inwardness, it redirects inscription outward, from self-dedication to mutual commitment. Against the absent cosmological warrant, it creates a new sacralizing mechanism: the act of mutual binding itself becomes the consecration, replacing throne and altar with the compact. Against co-option, it writes in a register the military has not learned to occupy — colloquial, lateral, contractual — rather than in the literary register the military can capture. Against documentary asymmetry, it draws on ethnic peripheral expertise rather than reinventing from the Bamar centre.

The *sagyok* is not the *sittan* — not the extractive census-document that makes populations legible to the state. It writes back to the centre. It is documentation by and for the communities themselves: the resistance needs legibility to each other, not illegibility from the sovereign. The *sagyok* converts circumstantial solidarity — the shared refusal that holds a coalition together while the common enemy persists — into structural obligation that will hold it together after the enemy is gone. The companion guide, *Writing Horizontal Compacts*, translates this into practice: vocabulary inventories, scoring frameworks, and drafting protocols for those working to extend *sagyok* from the commercial sphere into the political domain it has never been permitted to enter.

The scoring framework developed here provides a template for measuring the vertical default in any post-sacral transition: the distance between what a text says and what its grammar does. Politics shaped by monotheistic covenant theology arrived at horizontal constitutionalism with a conceptual resource unavailable in Buddhist political culture: a God who models binding agreement, whose compact with his people authorizes compacts among them. The scoring framework measures grammatical encoding, not theological heritage, but the absence of that resource helps explain why the vertical default persists where no tradition of divine covenant cleared the conceptual ground for mutual obligation between equals.

Declarations speak in particular languages, and those languages carry the architecture of the authority they are trying to replace. Arendt's 'lost treasure' — the revolutionary space that vanishes because no regime chose to preserve it — need not be lost if the space is inscribed before the window closes. A cause that goes uninscribed is a cause that awaits its capture. A cause inscribed in the grammar of its captor awaits its recapture. The task is to write in a register the captor has not yet learned to occupy.

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