

The Spring Revolution in Myanmar - Resisting a Closed Autocracy

A qualitative case study of the civil resistance movement in Myanmar after the 2021 coup.

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Abstract

Durable and effective civil resistance in high-risk authoritarian settings is a rare phenomenon. Existing research suggests that civil resistance in such contexts is usually short-lived and unsuccessful due to brutal repression. In this thesis I address the case of long-lived civil resistance in the closed autocracy of Myanmar.

In response to a military coup in 2021 a revolutionary movement emerged in Myanmar. This movement has retained the ability to be durable and continues to apply constant pressure against autocratic rule hindering the military from full control over population and territory. The analytical puzzle is what enabled the Spring Revolution to emerge after the 2021 coup and why is this movement long-lived despite brutal repression.

Research is conducted through a qualitative theory-guided case study. The analysis is based on a theoretical framework of civil resistance and social movement studies, and data collected from 46 semi-structured interviews from fieldwork in Northern Thailand.

The key findings of this thesis both explain the emergence and durability of the civil resistance movement in Myanmar since the 2021 coup. The key findings are summarized: 1) Successful formation and transformation of a strong collective identity, 2) Application of nonviolent methods from the onset to effectively overcome collective action problems, 3) Embracement of a leaderful resistance, and 4) Ability to continuously adapt, shift and develop strategies in response to brutal repression from the military regime, ultimately applying a combined strategy of both violent and nonviolent means.

This thesis contributes to the academic discussion on when and how civil resistance is effective in high-risk authoritarian settings. It helps to fill a gap in better understanding the capacities and strategies of actors resisting autocracy and authoritarian rule. The findings are context-specific to the contemporary case of Myanmar and useful for further study of contemporary cases elsewhere.

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All remaining mistakes and inaccuracies in this thesis are my own.

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Abbreviations

- ABFSU – All Burma Federation of Student Unions
- ACLED – The Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project
- ASSK – Aung San Suu Kyi
- CAP – Collective Action Problems
- CDM – Civil Disobedience Movement
- CRPH - Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw
- CSO – Civil Society Organizations
- CTUM – Confederation of Trade Unions Myanmar
- EAG – Ethnic Armed Groups
- EAO – Ethnic Armed Organizations
- FGWM – Federation of Garment Workers Myanmar
- IDP – Internally Displaced Person
- INGO – International Non-Governmental Organization
- LDC – Least Developed Country
- LDF – Local Defense Force
- LGBTQI+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer or questioning, Intersex, asexual and more.
- PDF – People’s Defense Force
- MAL – Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing
- MFM – Medical Family Mandalay
- MFTU – Myanmar Federation of Trade Unions
- NAVCO – Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes Data Project
- NGO – Non-Governmental Organization
- NLD – National League for Democracy
- NNER – National Network for Education Reform
- NSMT – New Social Movement Theory
- NUCC – National Unity Consultative Council
- NUG – National Unity Government
- SAC – State Administrative Council
- SMT – Social Movement Theory

UG – Urban Guerilla

UN – United Nations

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

USDP – Union Solidarity and Development Party

V-Dem – Varieties of Democracy

1.0 Introduction

«They shoot in the head, but they don't know the revolution is in the heart.»

The above quote was written by the Burmese poet Khet Thi, whilst he was protesting the 2021 military coup. He equipped himself nonviolently with words and poems against the lethal ammunition fired by Burmese security forces. Thi died during detention. His body was later returned to his family, with reports of organs missing (Reuters, 2021). Khet Thi is one of many activists who have sacrificed their life in the struggle for democracy and human rights in Myanmar.

For the first time in over twenty years, we can count more closed autocracies than liberal democracies in the world (Papada et al., 2023). In response to the world becoming more autocratic, people and movements are struggling for democracy and human rights. Despite substantial risk, people are leaping fearlessly into resistance to challenge autocratic leaders. A dominant strategy for change today is non-violent resistance, as seen in the recent revolutionary uprisings in Iran and Sri Lanka (Beck et al., 2022; Chenoweth, 2021). Revolutionary uprisings have also unfolded in the last decades in for instance Algeria, Hong Kong, Lebanon, or Sudan. As well as defiance of authoritarian rule in the Arab Spring in North-Africa and the Middle East in 2010/2011 and in Eastern Europe with the Color Revolutions from the 2000s (J. A. Goldstone et al., 2022).

It is widely known that collective power can create change, but we know little about what strategies and capacities are needed to ensure that movements are durable and effective when faced with repressive autocratic rulers. Some movements are successfully achieving disruptive changes such as removing dictators from power and installing democracy. Whilst other movements are effectively defeated, dissolved, or fail to meet their objectives.

Existing research suggests that the emergence of civil resistance is less likely in high-risk settings, such as closed autocracies, and if movements do emerge their chance of success in reversing or blocking autocratization is low given the effective and widespread use of brutal repression (Tomini et al., 2023). Existing research also suggests that the success rate of movements is declining (Beck et al., 2022).

The analytical puzzle of this thesis is how and why do civil resistance movements emerge in high-risk authoritarian contexts and what makes them effective and durable. Following the military coup in February 2021 the Spring Revolution emerged to challenge protracted military rule in Myanmar (Anonymous, 2021; Frontier Myanmar, 2021d; Irrawaddy, 2021c; Jordt et al., 2021; Kipgen, 2021). This civil resistance movement is still effective in applying pressure on the military despite being faced with brutal repression (Banyar Aung, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2023b; Loong, 2023; Stokke & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2023).

This thesis has the following research questions:

- 1) *What enabled the civil resistance movement in Myanmar to emerge after the 2021 coup?*
- 2) *Why is the civil resistance movement in Myanmar after the 2021 coup long lived despite brutal repression from the military regime?*

In this thesis, I refer to the revolutionary movement of the Spring Revolution in singular with an understanding that the movement consists of a variety of actors. These include the internal stakeholders and first movers such as the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), the ‘Gen Z’ youth and other individuals from prominent groups in Myanmar such as students, ethnic minorities, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), LGBTQI+ organizations and others. As well as the political, ethnic, and armed stakeholders which emerged from the Spring Revolution and/or have played prominent roles in the movement. This broad diversity of actors calls for focus and delimitation.

This thesis provides an in-depth analysis of the Spring Revolution spearheaded by CDM and Gen Z youth. It does not cover the political stakeholders which emerged after the coup such as the parliament Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the National Unity Government (NUG) or the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), nor does it cover the role of the Myanmar military. This thesis also excludes an in-depth analysis on the role of armed resistance in the form of new groups that emerged from the Spring Revolution such as the People’s Defense Force (PDF), Local Defense Force (LDF) and Urban Guerilla (UG). It will also not cover the current and pre-existing role of ethnic resistance in Myanmar including the Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs). These delimitations stem from my aim to analyze the first movers and internal actors of the Spring Revolution that emerged following the coup and their tactical choices and capacities that may offer explanations for the movement’s durability. Nevertheless, I will

discuss the role of armed resistance and the emergence of new political stakeholders as part of the applied strategies of the Spring Revolution and when discussing possible future scenarios for the movement. Lastly, as part of my limitations, I will not address the role of the international community nor the geopolitical implications for the movement, though these factors do play a significant role.

I have chosen to study the contemporary movement in Myanmar through a theory-guided qualitative case study applying a theoretical framework based on concepts and explanations from the fields of civil resistance and social movement studies. The analysis also stems from data collected from 46 semi-structured interviews with activists and individuals from the movement conducted during fieldwork in Northern-Thailand in December 2022 and January 2023.

As my key findings I argue that the four factors below explain both 1) why civil resistance in Myanmar emerged following the 2021 coup and 2) why the civil resistance has been long-lived despite brutal repression from the military regime.

- A) Successful formation and transformation of a strong collective identity across social, ethnic, economic, and political societal divisions. This collective identity was built on grievances triggered by the coup as a moral shock and critical event. It enabled collective claim-making and expansion of the movement's mobilization base.
- B) Application of nonviolent methods from the onset. This nonviolent approach was crucial for overcoming collective action problems and for the successful development of a mass movement opposing military rule and providing legitimacy to new political stakeholders as a credible alternative for Myanmar's political future.
- C) Embracement of a leaderful civil resistance. This multilayered character of the movement was built on mobilization bases and enabled an expansion of political space through the creation of new political stakeholders challenging protracted military rule in Myanmar.
- D) Ability of the civil resistance movement to continuously adapt, shift and develop their strategies. The movement's strategic repertoire was broadened in tandem and interaction

with brutal repression from the military regime, ultimately applying a combined strategy of both violent and nonviolent means.

The contribution of this thesis is to help fill a gap in the literature on actors that resist autocratization and authoritarian rule. This thesis showcases that the contemporary case of civil resistance in the closed autocracy of Myanmar contradict existing theories and research that implies that such a movement should have been short lived when faced with brutal repression. The findings of this thesis are relevant to better understand the contemporary movement in Myanmar and are useful for further research of contemporary movements elsewhere operating in high-risk contexts such as closed autocracies.

This thesis is structured into eight chapters. After this introduction, the second chapter consists of a literature review of existing research and current discussions on civil resistance and revolutionary movements in autocracies. The third chapter outlines Myanmar as a case of protracted military rule and longstanding civil resistance. The fourth chapter presents the theoretical framework, including a brief overview of the fields of civil resistance and social movement theory, and key theoretical assumptions. The fifth chapter is on methodology and presents the research design alongside a discussion of potential biases, limitations, and reflections related to ethical considerations. The sixth chapter is the analysis where I discuss and present the collected data, and the key findings. The seventh chapter discusses theoretical implications, comparative lessons from the Spring Revolution and possible future scenarios. Lastly, in chapter eight I conclude and provide suggestions for further research.

2.0 Civil Resistance in Closed Autocracies

A global third wave of autocratization is said to be unfolding in the form of democratic breakdowns or erosion of democratic institutions (Lührmann & Lindberg, 2019). According to V-Dem's latest democracy report: "(...) advances in global levels of democracy made over the last 36 years have been wiped out" (Papada et al., 2023, p. 6). The last decade has especially drawn attention to gradual democratic recession that yields minimalist democracies and electoral autocracies. Recent trends however indicate that stronger forms of autocratization is also on the rise with a recent increase of coups and closed autocracies (Boese et al., 2022). An estimated 28 per cent of the world's population, 2.2 billion people, live in closed autocracies today (Papada et al., 2023). In 2022 alone the nine following countries descended into closed autocracies: Afghanistan, Chad, Guinea, Haiti, Iran, Mali, Myanmar, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. A closed autocracy can be described as a political system where there are either no elections or no meaningful *de-facto* competition through multi-party elections for citizens to choose the chief executive of the government (Lührmann et al., 2018).

Researchers have increasingly grappled with understanding the durability and stability of autocracies. Such research has for instance focused on investigating formal institutions essential for democracies such as the role of elections, legislatures, and political parties to better understand democratic breakdowns. An own strand of research has dedicated its efforts to electoral autocracies as the most common type of autocracy today (Gandhi & Lust-Okar, 2009; Knutsen et al., 2017; Schedler, 2009). Much research has focused on understanding strategies and capacities of autocrats, for instance how autocrats use strategic repression, legitimacy and co-optation to achieve power and prolong their rule (Gerschewski, 2013). Due to the contemporary scholarship on democratization and autocratization we know quite a lot about the actors initiating autocratization and autocratic rule in various types of autocracies.

It has been widely observed that mass mobilization and uprising are important for democratization and regime breakdown (Dahl & Gleditsch, 2023; Della Porta, 2016; Kuran, 1991). Popular uprisings are second only to coups in removing autocratic leaders (Svolik, 2012). Coups can be defined as "illegal and overt attempts by the military or other elites within the state apparatus to unseat the sitting executive" (Powell & Thyne, 2011, p. 252; Tomini et al., 2023). Dahl and Gleditsch (2023) argue that mass mobilization in relation to coups could further increase the threat

of revolutionary movements and create incentives for implementation of democratic reforms. Regime change through coups could potentially open up for democratic change but could also be followed by democratic backsliding or autocratic consolidation (Dahl & Gleditsch, 2023). In autocratic regimes it is deemed that coups rarely lead to high-quality democratic rule rather it is likely that they lead to more autocracy and repression (Derpanopoulos et al., 2016; Tansey, 2016). Revolutionary movements have increasingly emerged in response to authoritarianism and the ongoing third wave of autocratization. From 2010 to 2020 we witnessed “more revolutionary nonviolent uprisings around the world than in any other period in recorded history” (Chenoweth, 2021, p. xxi). According to Goldstone et al. (2022) the 21st century has already witnessed three waves of revolutionary struggles, namely The Color Revolutions in post-Soviet Eurasia in the 2000s (e.g. Ukraine, Kyrgyzstan and Georgia), the Arab Spring in North Africa and the Middle East in 2010/2011 (e.g. Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain) and multiple cases of anti-government protests around the globe since the late 2010s.

Nonviolent resistance is a common approach and most view it as both a legitimate and successful method for creating change (Chenoweth, 2021). Simultaneously as nonviolent resistance has become a leading strategy for change worldwide, existing research suggests that social movements and collective action in authoritarian high-risk settings are less likely given fewer political structural opportunities, limited resources, and a controlled public discourse (Bayat, 2005; Tomini et al., 2023; Vairel, 2011). V-Dem has shown that ‘successful’ resistance to ongoing autocratization is a rare phenomenon and that once initiated there are few cases where autocratization is successfully blocked or reversed (Tomini et al., 2023). Existing research suggests that “governments are defeating revolutionary nonviolent movements more often than in prior decades” (Chenoweth, 2021, p. xxi) and it has often been observed that many movements have quickly disappeared after their emergence and failed to establish substantive democracies. Recent uprisings such as those in for instance Iran, Sri Lanka, Algeria, Armenia, Hong Kong, and Belarus show that the success rate of movements is experiencing a decline (Beck et al., 2022). The likelihood of success depends on characteristics of the movements; such as its size and inclusiveness, and it is widely known that autocrats undermine and repress movements (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Dahlum, 2023). Contemporary autocrats might have “(...) learned a gruesome lesson: as long as the coercive apparatus stays aligned with the regime and is willing

to repress, even kill, its own people, autocratic rulers can stay in power, at least in the short term.” (Beck et al., 2022, p. 126). Repression of movements could also potentially backfire and increase support for mobilization (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Davenport, 2022; Hess & Martin, 2006; Rasler, 1996).

In sum, we know less about those actors that resist autocracies and autocratization, and we know little about their capacities and strategies. There is a research gap and need for further studies on actors resisting closed autocracies, the motivation of these actors and the combination between their strategies as well as how they operate within structural constraints and opportunities (Tomini et al., 2023). Moreover, to better understand revolutionary movements and when they are durable and effective when faced with brutal repression. There is also a need to view revolutionary movements in closed autocracies not only within a success-failure dichotomy as to whether a movement succeeds in toppling an autocrat and is able to install democracy or not. It makes more sense to address revolutionary movements for democratization more as processes which are contentious, continuous, and open-ended (Stokke, 2023). Bloody stalemates such as those currently observed in Venezuela, Syria, Myanmar, and Yemen could be part of a longer trend.

Myanmar is a case of closed autocracy with an enduring movement effectively applying constant pressure on the military regime (Bünthe, 2021, 2022; Cassani & Tomini, 2020). The contemporary literature has less to offer regarding the case of civil resistance in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup (Loong, 2023; Stokke & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2023).

3.0 Protracted Military Rule and Longstanding Civil Resistance in Myanmar

To get a grasp on contemporary Myanmar it is essential to understand that coups and civil resistance build on a legacy of past mobilization and grievances. Thus the 2021 coup and the Spring Revolution that emerged in response could be seen as a continuation of the power struggles in post-independence Myanmar.

Since Myanmar gained independence from British colonial rule in 1948 the country has been marked by many protracted armed conflicts over government and state form (Stokke et al., 2022). Myanmar is home to history's longest running civil war due to ethnic conflict and 2023 marks the 75th year of civil war. Intrastate conflicts have mainly been played out between the military and Ethnic Armed Groups (EAG) (Callahan, 2003). Ethnic minorities have experienced the state as violent and predatory with an agenda to impose a unifying national identity (South, 2018). Grievances underlying ethnic resistance mainly stem from lack of influence in political decision-making processes. Moreover, from absence of basic services, lack of economic and social investments whilst the military simultaneously has extracted valuable natural resources from territories of ethnic minorities, and lastly, from the enforcement of state policy repressing cultural rights, religious freedoms and traditional practices (Kramer, 2021). Ethnic minorities have repeatedly called for a federal political settlement to end armed conflict. The Panglong agreement of 1947 was the first such agreement between ethnic groups and representatives from the Burman majority population to unite Myanmar after independence from colonial rule (Callahan, 2003; Kipgen, 2021). The agreement was abandoned after the assassination of General Aung San who led the negotiations. Many ethnic minorities still bear grudges for the failure to fulfil the Panglong agreement (David et al., 2022).

Throughout the contemporary history of Myanmar civil resistance has emerged in response to coups, power abuse, government mismanagement and violations from the military. Despite the military regime's suppression and oppression of political opposition, many activists and groups have persisted in Myanmar. They have operated within the political context available either in the open or underground in their struggle for democracy and human rights. The 1988 uprising and the Saffron revolution in 2007 are strong testimonies of past civil resistance which bear both

differences and similarities to civil resistance in the aftermath of the 2021 coup (Lintner, 2023; Stokke & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2023).

To sum up, my assessment is that there have been two on-going struggles about state form and rule in Myanmar. One about “democracy or autocracy” where pro-democracy and human rights defenders have fought against the military junta, and second a struggle of ethnic resistance led by ethnic minorities about federalism and decentralization rather than a unitary state centralization. Both struggles are relevant to understand the existing grievances in Myanmar, as well as to understand the background for the claims put forward by the Spring Revolution following the 2021 coup. In this thesis I will mainly focus on the unfolding struggle of “autocracy or democracy”.

3.1 Coups and Resistance

Myanmar has a long history of military rule. Since independence there have been four military coups in 1958, 1962, 1988 and 2021 (Selth, 2020). The Myanmar military has its own ideology and largely remains united in a common interest to maintain a political and economic monopoly (Farrelly, 2013). The military functions as a tight network made up of military elites, their families and close relatives, and business affiliates or cronies. Due to this complexity, the Myanmar military is often described as a state-within-the-state (Bünthe, 2022).

The military officially entered Burmese politics when General Ne Win installed himself as prime minister and formed a caretaker government in 1958 (Yamahata & Anderson, 2022a). The rationale behind this was to act on many destabilizing factors which had ridden Myanmar since independence (Yamahata & Anderson, 2022a). In 1960 an election was held but was shortly followed by a coup in 1962 led by General Ne Win. This coup was prompted by a myriad of reasons such as a declining economy, a weak government who asked for the military’s assistance and multiple armed insurgencies including ethnic resistance movements calling for autonomy (Devi, 2014). Following the 1962 coup, the military closed the political space for opposition by obliterating all existing societal institutions and by suppressing the surviving disparate elements. The National Solidarity Act of 1964 outlawed all political organizations and forbade the formation of new political associations without government permission (Kramer, 2015). The space for civil society and political opposition continued to be marginalized until 1988, except for the presence of informal groups of monks and students engaged in political discussions or non-political CSOs

which were allowed to operate under authoritarian rule (Than, 2013b). During this time the military carried out brutal acts of violence against its own citizens and especially towards ethnic minorities (Guan, 2007).

3.1.1 The 88 uprising

Whilst dominating politics in Myanmar, the military has been met with fierce resistance from civilians on several occasions. One such prominent example is the 88-uprising. In 1987 Myanmar, once known as the “rice bowl of Asia”, quickly plummeted to be included in the United Nations (UN) list of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) to secure aid grants (Than, 2013b). The military adopted desperate measures to cope with a deteriorating economy such as demonetizing larger currency notes in circulation. Student unrest was provoked and exploded in violence and demonstrations (Liow, 2022).

The 88-uprising culminated on 8th August 1988 with a general strike as a testimony of civilian discontent with military rule. It resulted in mass massacres of more than 3,000 peaceful protesters (Yamahata & Anderson, 2022a). From the 88 uprising counter elites to the military emerged in the form of student leaders and pro-democracy activists who continued to carry on the struggle despite repression (Than, 2013b). They are known as the 88-generation and have played an important role in inspiring a new generation of leaders and political activists, as seen in the Spring Revolution (Thein-Lemelson, 2021). Students have engaged in political activism throughout the history of independent Myanmar (Hong & Kim, 2019).

In response to the 88-uprising General Ne Win resigned but failed to stem popular protest. Aung San Suu Kyi (ASSK), the daughter of national hero General Aung San, had coincidentally returned to Myanmar shortly before to nurse her sick mother and responded to the protests by emerging as a charismatic leader of the opposition force to the military (Liow, 2022). Elections were held in 1990 and the newly established party National League for Democracy (NLD) led by ASSK won a landslide victory. Instead of respecting the public vote the military refused to hand over power (Yamahata & Anderson, 2022a).

3.2 From autocracy to ‘democracy’

In 2003 the military launched a ‘Roadmap to Democracy’ developed to guide Myanmar’s transition from military rule to a hybrid semi-democratic form of government, described by the junta as a ‘discipline flourishing democracy’ (Liow, 2022). The military also started to draft a new constitution. Civil resistance was triggered in 2007 in response to the economic situation and again showcased people’s discontent with military rule (Rogers, 2008).

3.2.1 The Saffron Revolution

In September 2007, Buddhist monks and pro-democracy activists led mass demonstrations which initially protested against high living-costs, but quickly grew to become anti-government (Rogers, 2008). The September 2007 demonstrations were the most significant civil protests in Myanmar since the 88-uprising (Selth, 2008). These demonstrations were named the ‘Saffron Revolution’ due to the participation of many Buddhist monks with their orange-colored clothing.

The Saffron Revolution began on 15 August 2007 with a few small and isolated demonstrations (Rogers, 2008). In the beginning a demonstration took place where a small group of Buddhist monks were attacked and beaten by security forces (Mathieson, 2007). This mistreatment of the Buddhist sangha outraged especially young monks, who responded by organizing their own nation-wide protest movement (Rogers, 2008). In addition to calling out for economic reforms to alleviate the suffering of the population they now also demanded an official apology for the gross disrespect shown to the sangha. Large street marches featuring citizens of all ages and walks of life emerged and included demands for overthrowing the military regime.

Unlike the response to the 88-uprising, the military initially exercised a degree of restraint when faced with public protests. As protests grew and became widespread the military reacted (Selth, 2008). First, they launched a propaganda campaign challenging the sincerity and legitimacy of the monks and accused other protesters of being terrorists or agents of hostile foreign powers. Thereafter security forces cracked down on protesters with tear gas, baton charges and on several occasions lethal force (Mathieson, 2007). The violent crackdown on the peaceful protesters soon served its purpose as the streets of Myanmar were left empty and the public apparently were cowed into submission. But as we now know many continued to resist through underground work. Most of those heavily involved in the protests were arrested, detained, went into hiding or fled to

Thailand were many continued to work from exile for a free and democratic Burma (Ganesan, 2017; Moe, 2013).

Both the 88-uprising and Saffron Revolution has illustrated how civil resistance in Myanmar has taken its form through mobilizing individuals for collective action through nonviolent means. This bears similarities to the Spring Revolution, but those prior movements quickly dissolved or dispersed once faced with violent crackdowns which differs from the endurance of the contemporary movement.

3.2.2 Cyclone Nargis, the 2008 Constitution and 2010 elections

In May 2008 Cyclone Nargis hit South-Eastern Myanmar and sparked a humanitarian disaster which was badly and inadequately managed by the military, especially as the inflow of international aid was limited or hindered. Cyclone Nargis left 140,000 people dead or missing and destroyed 800,000 homes (Skidmore & Wilson, 2010). In the aftermath of the cyclone CSOs were formed in response to the military's lack of action. Local CSOs emerged and sprang into action to carry out work of relief and rehabilitation, either independently or in cooperation with INGOs or foreign relief agencies (Than 2015). These came in addition to local groups and organizations working on social development programs across the country since the government's expansion of legal associational space in the mid-1990s (Skidmore & Wilson, 2010). Different types of advocacy groups for human rights and other issues, for instance forced labor or HIV/AIDS, persisted despite continued persecution and harassment from the military (Ducci, 2017).

Amidst destruction and loss of life from the cyclone, the military carried on with a nation-wide referendum on the 2008 constitution (Liow, 2022). The approval of the 2008 constitution and the 2010 elections kicked off the transition from autocracy to a 'discipline flourishing democracy' (David, 2018). Through the 2008 constitution the military secured control over key ministerial posts and 25 per cent of the seats in parliament as a guarantee and security mechanism against future constitutional changes (Crouch, 2019; Harding & Khin Khin Oo, 2017). Thein Sein, a former military general and party leader of the civilian party of the military junta, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), was elected president and took charge of the government in 2011 following the results of the 2010 election. NLD did not compete as they did not approve of the terms of the elections (Kipgen, 2021). A by-election was held in 2012 where NLD competed and defeated the military controlled USDP by winning 43 of 45 seats (Than,

2013a). NLD became the largest opposition party in parliament and ASSK was for the first time an elected politician in Myanmar (Liow, 2022; Selth, 2020). In 2015 a free and fair nationwide general election was held. NLD won a landslide victory like in 1990 securing approximately 80 percent of the seats (Kipgen, 2021). This time the military respected the results and allowed the government to partially pass into civilian hands.

Following the transition space for civil society actors and political opposition gradually expanded (Ducci, 2017; Skidmore & Wilson, 2010). The civil society sector grew, and many groups and organizations tried to influence the semi-civilian governments of USDP and later the NLD with varying success (Lidauer, 2012). Political reforms introduced after 2010 included for instance the government passing and revising labor laws which allowed formation of independent trade unions. More than 900 basic trade unions registered within the first year after the ban was lifted (Henry, 2015). Political space for advocacy was somewhat expanded but still limited during this time.

Many acts of civil resistance occurred after the transition and showcased an increased political space for claim-making. Before the 2015 election, students from the All Burma Federation of Students Unions (ABFSU) organized a uprising in protest against a new education bill (Groves & Stapnes, 2023). Alongside the National Network for Education Reform (NNER) students led and initiated a walking march from Mandalay to Yangon to highlight their fears that the new bill would constrain academic freedom at universities. They never made it to Yangon as the USDP government brutally cracked down on them about 90 miles away from the former capital. Many student leaders were detained or arrested. Other examples include large-scale protests and sit-ins organized by trade unions and prominently by garment factory workers (Ko Maung, 2021).

In November 2020, the most recent general election was held and NLD won yet another landslide victory by securing 83 percent of the seats (Liow, 2022). This was a crushing defeat and a blow to the military. Allegations of election fraud were put forward by the USDP though independent election observers never reported any evidence to support these claims (Asian Network for Free Elections, 2021).

3.3 2021 Military Coup and the Spring Revolution

The military staged a coup d'état on February 1, 2021, which marked an abrupt end to a decade of democratization and hybrid rule (Kipgen, 2021; Liow, 2022). The coup happened on the same day as the newly elected parliament was supposed to be sworn into office. A year-long state of emergency was introduced and commander-in-chief of the armed forces General Min Aung Hlaing (MAL) was inserted as the head of the newly established State Administrative Council (SAC) (Myanmar Study Group, 2022). State Counsellor ASSK, President Win Myint and other prominent NLD leaders were arrested and charged with a series of offences. Meanwhile remaining parliamentarians and political activists either went home and were silenced, fled the country or went into hiding (Thein-Lemelson, 2021).

The coup was met with nonviolent resistance from the public in the form of the Spring Revolution, an anti-coup and pro-democracy civil resistance movement, including citizens from all walks of life challenging the military's legitimacy and power claim (Frontier Myanmar, 2021d).

First the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) emerged as a nonviolent movement and anti-coup campaign consisting of workers and civil servants in Myanmar (Anonymous, 2021; Tin Maung Htwe, 2022). CDM quickly mobilized hundreds of thousands to pledge not to work under military rule as an act of civil disobedience (Kipgen, 2021; Yamahata & Anderson, 2022a). The key strategy of CDM was to disrupt all major government functions, impacting the country's economy, and ultimately force a state collapse and downfall of the military regime.

Several definitions of CDM are in-use. Some strictly define the CDM movement as consisting only of civil servants from the public sectors in Myanmar, whilst others include workers from the private sectors. Some apply a broader definition to also include for instance students who are acting in disobedience by refusing to go back to university. In this thesis I will apply a definition of CDM that includes both civil servants and workers from the public and private sector in Myanmar.

Secondly, the Spring Revolution emerged as a revolutionary uprising from youth, students and other pro-democracy activists (Lintner, 2021b). The Gen Z are youth born from the mid-90s to the 2010s, are mainly between the age of 15 – 25, and have grown up with and are confident with the use of digital technology. The Gen Z in Myanmar have also grown up in a more democratic society

than their parents and grandparents. They took on a leading role and initiated street protests and other creative nonviolent activities to mobilize (Jordt et al., 2021). To draw international attention, they effectively played with references from popular culture, such as the three-finger salute known from the famed book and film series *Hunger Games*. This was copied from the democracy movement in Thailand and is one example of how they drew inspiration from both contemporary movements and past mobilizations in Myanmar. Such as the 88-generation or from the Milk Tea Alliance in the region, referring to the loosely organized youth- and student led online democracy and human rights movement across Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar (Tung & Kasuya, 2021; Wang & Rauchfleisch, 2022).

See the timeline further below (Figure 4, p. 20-23) for a more detailed overview of how the Spring Revolution unfolded from February 2021 to February 2023.

The name Spring Revolution fits well into the variety of names labelling similar revolutionary uprisings such as the Yasmine Revolution (Tunisia) or Tulip Revolution (Kyrgyzstan) (Beck et al., 2022). The name refers to the season following winter and acts as a metaphor. Popular cultural quotes such as from resistance poet Pablo Neruda: “You can cut all the flowers, but you can’t keep spring from coming” (Eisner, 2018) were widely used online, also including a reference in the Myanmar context to the military oppressing peaceful activists but not being able to hinder the Spring Revolution.

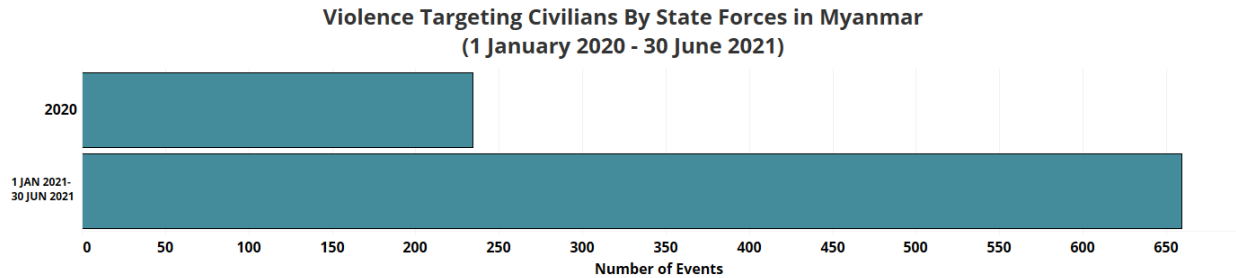
The military was taken by surprise by the large-scale and multifaceted civil resistance. They did not foresee how the coup could trigger such a massive popular opposition (Kipgen, 2021). A clear mismatch between the military’s perceived support and trust from the population was revealed (Ye Myo Hein, 2022a). New political actors quickly formed and drew legitimacy from the movement, such as the CRPH representing the elected parliament and the NUG as a government representing the people of Myanmar (King, 2022).

Like the reaction to the Saffron Revolution, the military first cautiously observed the mass uprisings of the Spring Revolution but soon responded with brutal repression and crackdown on the peaceful civilian protesters (Human Rights Watch, 2022; Irrawaddy, 2021f, 2021h). From mid to end February 2021, the military used tear gas, water cannons, rubber bullets and sound grenades, and escalated to lethal force through live ammunition and battlefield weapons (International Crisis Group, 2021).

There has been a sharp increase in violence against civilians since the coup, as seen in the figure below.

Figure 1

Violence Targeting Civilians By State Forces in Myanmar (1 January 2020 – 30 June 2021).



Note. From “Myanmar’s Spring Revolution” by E. Bynum, 2021. Retrieved May 21, 2023, from: <https://acleddata.com/2021/07/22/myanmars-spring-revolution/> Copyright 2021 by Armed Conflict Location Event Data Project (ACLED).

The Armed Conflict Location Event Data Project (ACLED) reports that more than one out of every four recorded incidents of violence targeting civilians by domestic state forces in 2022 took place in Myanmar (Bynum, 2023). This is two and a half times the number of such recorded events as in Afghanistan, which is recorded with the second highest number of incidents. Since the coup 2,940 deaths and 17,542 arrests by the military have been verified (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2023).

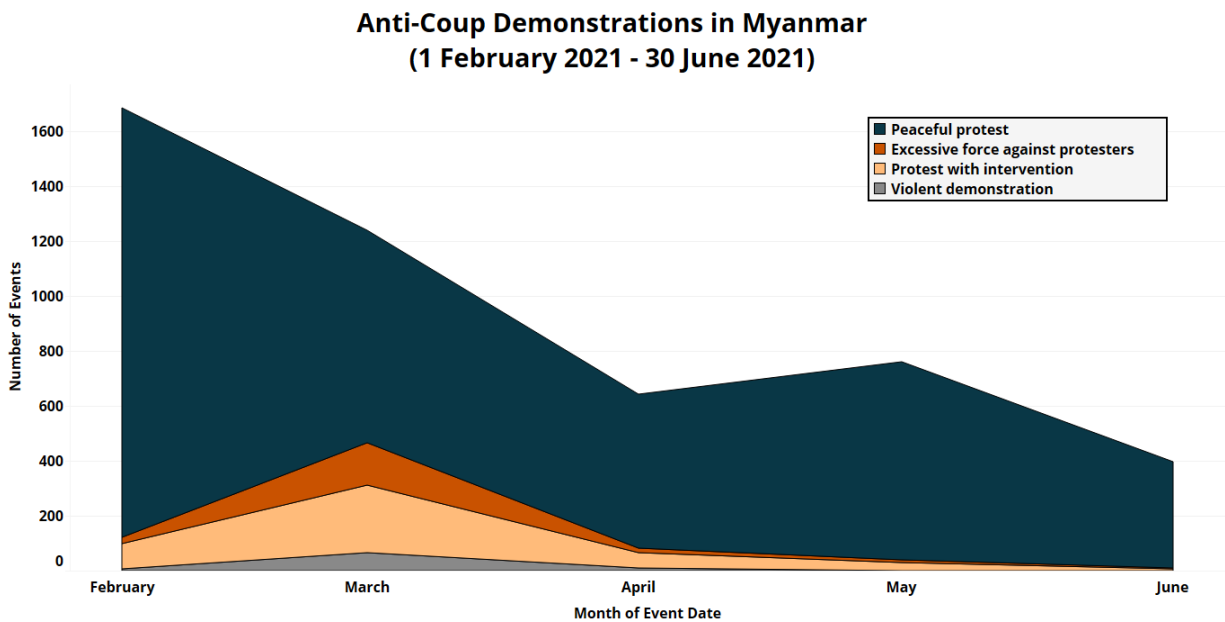
Widespread human rights abuses have been documented by the UN from 1 February 2022 to 31 January 2023 in Myanmar (OHCHR, 2023). Human rights violations include widespread use of extrajudicial executions, progressively targeting individuals accused of association with anti-military armed groups, use of torture and ill-treatment by the military including of children, enforced disappearances particularly of prominent political figures, and religious and community leaders, arrests, and detentions, sexual and gender-based violence, and hindrance of humanitarian aid. Moreover, the military has adopted rules, including martial law, designed to target anti-coup opposition and severely restrict civic space (OHCHR, 2023). The military has also made use of tactics to suppress opposition through measures such as banning independent news outlets, arresting journalists, cutting internet connections, destroying properties, and looting residents

(Human Rights Watch, 2023). The military is also behind systematic and widespread burning of villages and dwellings. Nearly 80 per cent of the country’s 330 townships have been impacted by armed clashes (OHCHR, 2023).

The movement has responded to the use of brutal repression with both violent and nonviolent means. In the period from 1st February 2021 to 30 June 2021 predominantly nonviolent means were applied, as seen by the two figures below from ACLED (Bynum, 2021).

Figure 2.

Anti-Coup Demonstrations in Myanmar (1 February 2021 – 30 June 2021).

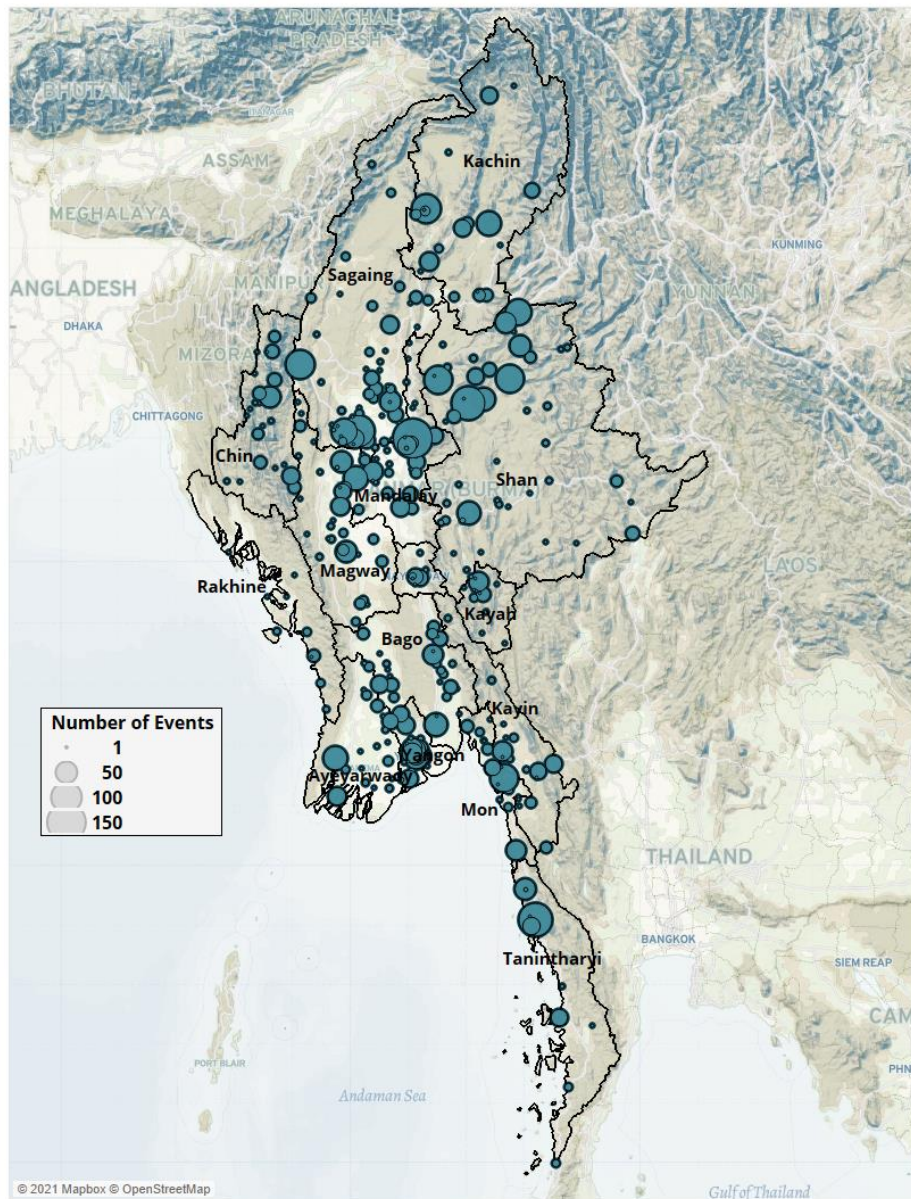


Note. From “Myanmar’s Spring Revolution” by E. Bynum, 2021. Retrieved May 21, 2023, from: <https://acleddata.com/2021/07/22/myanmars-spring-revolution/> Copyright 2021 by Armed Conflict Location Event Data Project (ACLED).

Figure 3

Anti-Coup Demonstrations in Myanmar from 1 February 2021 until 30 June 2021.

**Anti-Coup Demonstrations in Myanmar
(1 February 2021 - 30 June 2021)**



Note. From “Myanmar’s Spring Revolution” by E. Bynum, 2021. Retrieved May 21, 2023, from: <https://acleddata.com/2021/07/22/myanmars-spring-revolution/> Copyright 2021 by Armed Conflict Location Event Data Project (ACLED).

To sum up, this chapter provided useful background to better understand contemporary Myanmar as a case of protracted military rule and longstanding civil resistance. This background is relevant for assessing why the Spring Revolution has emerged and endured since the 2021 military coup. The contemporary case can be seen as a continuation of the struggles over state form in Myanmar.

Figure 4.

Timeline Spring Revolution (February 2021 – February 2023).

TIMELINE

February 2021 – February 2023

2021



February 2

Civil Disobedience Campaign launched
Healthcare workers and civil servants launch a nation-wide Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and urge workers to join a general strike and not work under military rule.

Urging people to resist

Leaders from the NLD and the 88-generation denounce the coup and call on people to resist nonviolently.



Red Ribbon Campaign

Civil servants launch a Red Ribbon Campaign to symbolize oppression under military rule.

February 4

Street Protests

Street protests initiated in Yangon by workers and led by trade unions. Street protests in Mandalay initiated by Gen Z youth and pro-democracy activists. Protests quickly spread across the country.



February 6-7

Mass protests continue

Civilians continue to join daily street protests led and initiated by Gen Z youth and workers.



February 1

Military Coup

The military in Myanmar seized power in a coup d'état and declared a state of emergency in response to allegations of election fraud. The civilian government and leaders of the National League for Democracy (NLD) arrested.

State Administration Council formed

The military forms a State Administration Council (SAC) and installs Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing as head of state.

The people of Myanmar reject the coup

Civilians bang pots and pans to express defiance with military rule. Gen Z youth and activists use social media to share information about the coup.



February 3

Social Media Blocked

The military orders a blockage of social media.

February 5

The Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw established

The CRPH parliament established by Members of Parliament based on the 2020 election results.



CDM grows

100 government hospitals, 22 universities, colleges and schools, 16 government departments across 14 states and 87 townships have joined CDM.

Internet blocked

The military junta blocks the internet intermittently.



February 8-9

Military imposes martial law

Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing urges people to keep emotions in check and civil servants to return to work.



February 10-21

The military starts using lethal force

Lethal force is used by the military to dispel mass rallies.

First killing

The first fatality of the anti-coup movement. A 20-year-old girl was shot by the police whilst attending protests in Nay Pyi Taw.



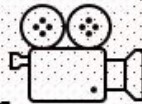
23 February - March

Crackdown

The military crackdown on protesters with mass arrests and inflicts injuries.

Intensified Repression

Security forces increase the use of lethal force against protesters. The military forms an own local security and rule of law team.



Banning media and targeting journalists

The military is increasingly targeting journalists with lawsuits and violence. Licenses are revoked for independent media.



Gen Z start fleeing to rural areas controlled by Ethnic Armed Groups

As soon as the first killings happen small groups of Gen Z youth and students flee from urban areas and travel to seek assistance from Ethnic Armed Groups to get training in handling weapons.

February 22

The Five 2s Demonstration

A nationwide street protest on 22.02.2022 called the Five 2s is organized by the Spring Revolution to reject the military coup.

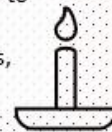
Fringe Violence and Self-Defense

Civilians and protesters start engaging in fringe violence and acts of violence in self-defense against repression from the Burmese security forces. Defense groups are established to apply safety measures such as escape routes. This prolongs street protests.



Flashmobs, Light Strikes and other creative nonviolent resistance forms

Protesters largely abandon street protest and start applying other forms of nonviolent resistance in response to the brutal repression, such as flashmobs, light strikes, silent strikes, banging pots and pans etc.



National Unity Consultative Council formed

A National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) is formed with representatives from political parties, ethnic minorities, CSOs, workers, Gen Z youth and other participants in the Spring Revolution. They launch a federal democracy charter and call for a civilian government to represent the people of Myanmar.





National Unity Government formed
The civilian National Unity Government is officially formed with legitimacy from NUCC and CRPH as a government for the people of Myanmar. NUG includes representatives from NLD and EAOs.

May - December

People's Defense Force
NUG declare that they will establish a People's Defense Force in self-defense to protect citizens against violent attacks from the military.



Death executions by pro-democracy activists
The military executes four pro-democracy activists on 23rd July 2021. Ko Jimmy, former NLD parliamentarian, Ko Phyo Zeya Thaw, Ko Hla Myo Aung and Ko Aung Thura Zaw.



January

Armed Clashes
2022 starts off with armed clashes between military troops and EAOs. PDFs and LDFs are actively involved, and Gen Z youth are still fleeing from urban areas to join PDFs to get training.



March - December

Continued resistance
The anti-coup and pro-democracy civil resistance movement continue to challenge military rule both with violent and nonviolent means.

April

Increase of arrests and targeting the civil resistance movement
The military is increasingly targeting members of the resistance movement. Celebrities are arrested for promoting protests on social media. Protest leaders and activists are arrested, and the military declares that NUG is an unlawful association.



Continued repression
The military declares that NUG, CRPH and PDF are terrorist organizations. Protesters are still targeted through increased arrests, torture and killings. The military forms a caretaker government and says that the state of emergency will be lifted. New airstrikes are launched in areas controlled by EAOs with many civilian casualties.



Continued resistance
Nationwide civil resistance continues such as flashmobs, silent strikes, light strikes and other creative forms of nonviolent resistance. For instance, protesters arrange a mock funeral and curse Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing on his birthday in July and political prisoners stage protests. On 9th August protests are held to commemorate the 1988 uprising and call for an end to military rule. Human Rights Day in December is marked by a nationwide silent strike.

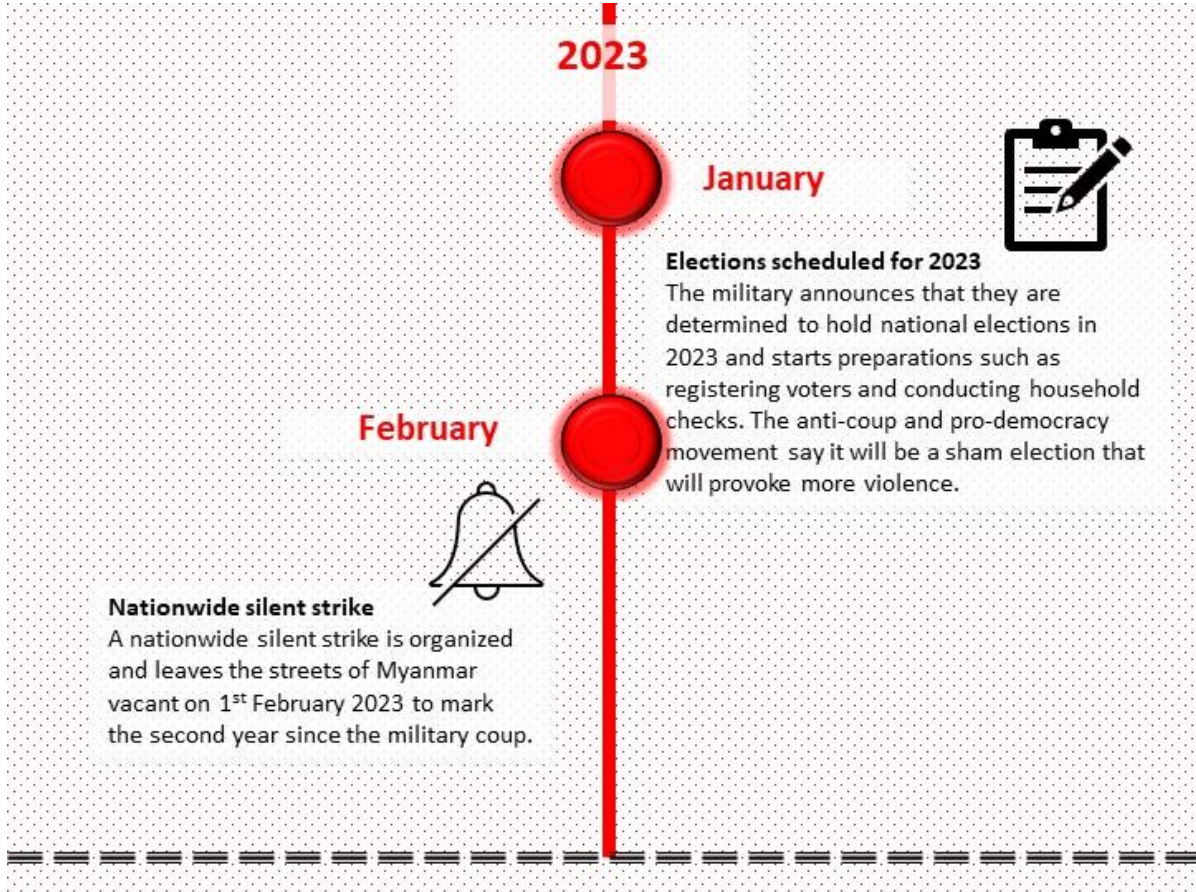
2022

February



Nationwide Silent Strike
A nationwide silent strike is organized and shuts down Myanmar on 1st February 2022 to mark one year since the military coup.

Continued repression
The military continues to brutally repress the opposition both through violent and judicial means. Armed clashes are ongoing.



Note. Timeline created by thesis author.

4.0 Theoretical Framework

In this chapter I present the theoretical framework which will be applied to the analytical puzzle of this thesis of how civil resistance movements emerge and endure in high-risk authoritarian contexts despite brutal repression.

I study the Spring Revolution as a revolutionary movement for two reasons. First, due to the movement themselves identifying as a revolutionary movement, and secondly as it fits within contemporary small “r” political revolutions where civil resistance is a prominent part of contemporary struggles for regime change (Beck et al., 2022). It is worth noting that such small “r” revolutions differ significantly from the historical big “R” revolutions:

“If Big “R” Revolution presents itself as a Messiah bringing redemption to history’s injustices, small “r” revolutions are humbler. Their promise is not earthly salvation, but the striving for the *possibility* of radical transformation, of something better, even if that something better will never be fully realized. They are more concerned with the everyday, the local, and the granular than the global projects that animated the modern epic of Revolution.” (Beck et al., 2022, p. 210).

In this thesis, I apply a theory-guided and theory-nuancing approach. The theoretical framework builds on two strands of literature: civil resistance theory and Social Movement Theory (SMT). I find contributions from these fields particularly useful to answer the research questions of this thesis since they provide conceptual tools for understanding how grievances, collective identity, mobilization structures, political spaces and collective strategies may produce and sustain a revolutionary movement against autocratization and authoritarian rule.

I start with defining and conceptualizing what civil resistance is before presenting a brief overview of the fields of SMT and civil resistance studies. Thereafter, I present and discuss relevant concepts and theories of why and how civil resistance movements emerge and endure. Lastly, I present theoretical assumptions related to the case of Myanmar.

4.1 What is Civil Resistance?

The concept of civil resistance has been in use for about 100 years and was first coined by Gandhi while struggling against British colonialism in India (Chenoweth, 2021). Scholars and practitioners have since defined and conceptualized the phenomena of civil resistance in different ways. Most agree that civil resistance involves a form of people power meaning citizens or civilians collectively making claims.

Civil resistance is usually described through the application of and moral commitment to nonviolent methods. Sharp defines civil resistance as a nonviolent resistance technique for achieving political, economic and/or social objectives through applying power in a conflict without the use of violence (Sharp, 1973). Chenoweth (2021) provides a somewhat similar definition:

“(...) a form of collective action that seeks to affect the political, social, or economic status quo without using violence or the threat of violence against people to do so. It is organized, public, and explicitly nonviolent in its means and ends.” (Chenoweth, 2021, p. 1).

Moreover, civil resistance as described by Chenoweth is carried out by unarmed civilians and includes a variety of coordinated and noninstitutional methods such as strikes, protests, demonstrations and parallel institution building to promote change. It is an active confrontational technique applied by people or movements to promote conflict, create disruption and amass power to either affect, alter or transform the status quo (Chenoweth, 2021).

Such definitions of civil resistance as equivalent to nonviolent resistance, in terms of the use of nonviolent methods and/or moral commitments to nonviolence as the most righteous strategy in both means and ends, pose an analytical problem. Even though many movements adhere to the use of nonviolence, few movements can be characterized as either purely violent or nonviolent (Ackerman & Kruegler, 1994). Defining civil resistance strictly within a violence vs. non-violence dichotomy could obscure tactical combinations that are present in many movements. Episodes of unarmed violence in nonviolent movements is very common (Beck et al., 2022). According to the Nonviolent and Violent Campaign Outcomes (NAVCO) dataset 80 per cent of nonviolent movements between 1945 and 2013 included some degree of low-level violence (Chenoweth & Lewis, 2013).

When faced with brutal repression, movements often apply low-level protest violence, such as unarmed violence and/or acts of self-defense. Such acts of violence do not necessarily imply that nonviolent movements will fully shift to a violent strategy and develop into armed groups, which are often defined based on their use of violent means and deliberate use of power and force to achieve political goals.

Scholars have provided useful concepts to capture such episodes of low-level protest violence in nonviolent movements that occur in response to brutal repression. Anisin (2020) refers to acts of self-defense as ‘reactive violence’. Abbs & Gleditsch (2021) use organized violence to mean for instance warfare and terrorism, and disorganized violence to explain for instance riots or scuffles with the police. The use of violence could also be understood as a spectrum:

“We may think of a spectrum of (non-)violence, ranging from non-violent moves to verbal violence (unrealized threats of violence) to property violence (e.g. graffiti, uprooting olive trees, vandalism) to unarmed violence (e.g. stone-throwing) to armed violence (e.g. the use of firearms and bombs) to catastrophic violence (e.g. nuclear weapons). (Pressman, 2017, p. 520-522).

Strict definitions of civil resistance based on the violence-nonviolence dichotomy simplify and fail to fully grasp contemporary movements which do not fall into an either-or category (Beck et al., 2022). Additional concepts explaining acts of low-level protest violence within nonviolent movements either spontaneously or strategically fall short in explaining how such acts are not necessarily isolated reactionary or self-defensive acts of violence for movements. Violence could be part of a larger strategy of movements when acting reactively and in self-defense against brutal repression and could expand beyond low-level protest violence and include armed insurgency.

The Spring Revolution in Myanmar began nonviolently, but eventually applied a combined strategy of both violent and nonviolent means when faced with brutal repression. Defining this movement as either an armed group or a nonviolent movement will blur the tactical choices of applied strategies.

I argue that movements could apply a combined strategy of both violent and nonviolent means and should still be characterized as a civil resistance movement when acts of violence are carried out

reactively in response to brutal repression. When referring to civil resistance in this thesis I will apply my own definition developed to capture this:

Civil resistance is a form of collective action where citizens make joint claims to alter or challenge the political, social, or economic status quo through predominantly nonviolent means but not excluding the use of reactive violent means when movements are faced with brutal repression.

4.2 Studying Revolutionary Movements

To make sense of the contemporary revolutionary movement in Myanmar it is useful to provide a brief overview of how movements generally have been researched within the fields of SMT and civil resistance studies.

4.2.1 Civil Resistance Studies

Studies of nonviolence or civil resistance was born with the Gandhian movement, which is known as the first to apply civil resistance techniques to wage a nonviolent war for independence (Nepstad, 2015). Based on studies of Gandhi and his movement, the earliest contributions to the field were focused on moral dimensions of civil resistance.

In the 1970s civil resistance studies saw a shift from moral dimensions to a pragmatic approach. This shift was spearheaded by Sharp who proposed that strategic nonviolence is simply more effective than the use of violence and his political theory of nonviolent action could be summarized as the power being social and if citizens refuse to obey and cooperate no ruler can maintain power (Beck et al., 2022; Sharp, 1973, 2012; Sharp & Paulson, 2005). The task of the civil resistance scholars from then on was to discover which nonviolent strategies and tactics were most effective in provoking a withdrawal of cooperation.

In the 2010s civil resistance scholars strayed away from documentation of successful cases toward empirical testing of nonviolence theories. An incredible surge of publications and research has been developed in the last decade. Especially with an increased use of quantitative analysis and comparative research designs for theory testing (Nepstad, 2015). Scholars have for instance compared successful and failed nonviolent movements or have compared the use of violent or nonviolent strategy. The study of Chenoweth and Stephan (2011, p. 7) is one such example where the most striking finding is that between 1900 and 2006 “nonviolent resistance campaigns were nearly twice as likely to achieve full or partial success as their violent counterparts”. There is a

range of large N studies which have revealed the importance of various agency-based factors such as the size or scale of protest, defections by armed forces, international sanctions and movement leadership (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Della Porta, 2014; Johnstad, 2010; Nepstad, 2011; Schock, 2005; Svensson & Lindgren, 2011; Tusalem, 2007).

Civil resistance scholars today are mostly focused on examining outcomes and factors affecting whether movements succeed. They will generally claim that the choice and success of nonviolent methods is highly contingent and context-specific (Chenoweth & Ulfelder 2017). “(...) if carefully planned and executed, the story goes, nonviolent movements can defeat virtually any adversary, regardless of any and all structural constraints” (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011, p. 211; Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015).

Compared with historical movements four general changes have been found related to contemporary movements (Chenoweth, 2021). Summed up, these are: 1) they are generally smaller in size than their historical counterparts, 2) they rely more on street demonstrations than other nonviolent methods, 3) they tend to embrace leaderless resistance and 4) they are increasingly being characterized as less disciplined by nonviolent action, meaning that low-level protest violence occur. I will address these again in the analysis chapter.

To sum up, civil resistance studies provide especially useful when assessing the tactical and strategic choices of movements. I will apply concepts and theoretical explanations deriving from civil resistance studies to better make sense of the strategies of the Spring Revolution.

4.2.2 Social Movement Theory

Whilst civil resistance studies have engaged with nonviolent strategies of movements and examined when movements succeed, scholars within SMT have simultaneously grappled with the questions of what social movements are, understanding why and how they emerge as well as how movements operate within social, political, and economic structures. SMT originated in the 1950s and 1960s from the US and has been heavily influenced by sociology and political science.

It is not hard to come by a vast number of definitions and conceptualizations of what a social movement is (Della Porta & Diani, 2006; Goodwin & Jasper, 2003; McAdam & Snow, 1997; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998; Turner & Killian, 1987). I will use the following definition in this thesis. Social movements are broad socio-political phenomena which operate over time and consist of

various actors which express themselves through political protest and build on a common identity (Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015). Moreover, social movements organize collective action, act on grievances, and often engage outside of traditional political processes and institutions with a purpose of making claims and challenging authorities. The conceptualization of social movements is somewhat like the traditional concept of civil resistance, though without the explicit focus on violent or nonviolent strategy. I study the movement in Myanmar as singular with an understanding that it consists of a multifold of actors and organizations, some which will be highlighted more than others in this thesis.

In the beginning SMT scholars focused on rational collective action theory to make sense of social movements. The theoretical contributions of SMT which have developed since then could be divided into four main schools. Three of them originated mainly from North American scholars and focus on framing, resource mobilization and political opportunity structures. Lastly, the fourth focus on how structural changes and grievances yield collective identity and stems from New Social Movement Theory (NSMT) developed in Europe (Gamson, 1975; Jenkins, 1983; McCarthy & Zald, 1977).

Resource mobilization theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977) refers to the mobilization that occurs when movements can assemble resources, such as human, financial, and informational resources. Mobilization could be defined as “an increase of the resources available to a political actor for collective making of claims” and demobilization as “a reduction of this aggregation of resources” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 120). Resource mobilization theory would generally indicate that it is easier for privileged groups to mobilize (Snow et al., 2004).

Political Opportunity Structures (POS) could be defined as the aspects of a political system which affects and determines opportunities to mobilize. Changes in the political system such as openings or closures can either facilitate or constrain movements (Giugni et al., 1999; Kitschelt, 1986; Koopmans, 1999; Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015). Four dimensions of POS are distinguished by McAdams which are the 1) the relative openness or closure of an institutionalized political system, 2) the stability or instability of the broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity, 3) the presence or absence of elite allies and 4) a state’s capacity and propensity for repression (McAdam et al., 1996).

From the 1980s theories of framing and collective identities emerged (Benford & Snow, 2000; Cohen, 1985; Melucci, 1985; Snow et al., 1986). These were developed partially in response to limitations in POS and resource mobilization theory (Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015). Theories of framing and collective identity address how social movements draw on discourses and narratives to frame issues and grievances, as well as how motivation and formation of collective identity can enable collective responses.

The theoretical schools of SMT and NSMT have with varied success been applied to explain the existence of mobilization in authoritarian high-risk settings (Bayat, 2005; Vairel, 2011). Scholars studying social movements in the global South have especially criticized the application of these main theories but some also point out that challenges related to the theoretical concepts are not necessarily unique to the context but rather present analytical challenges as many of the concepts lose analytical power by simply being so broad and in soaking up too many different phenomena (Jasper & Duyvendak, 2018).

To sum up, SMT is especially useful for understanding how and when movements emerge, as well as how such movements operate within structural conditions. I will apply such concepts when analyzing how the Spring Revolution emerged and endured.

4.3 Why and How Movements Emerge and Endure?

To explain why movements emerge I will outline underlying factors which are found through quantitative studies to correlate with the emergence of uprisings, and I will discuss moral shocks and critical events as possible triggering factors. To assess how movements emerge I will discuss theoretical concepts to explain how collective action problems are overcome. These include collective identity and grievances, leadership and mobilization bases, and political opportunity structures. I argue that these theoretical concepts are useful in understanding both how movements emerge and how they endure. To assess how movements endure, or survive and are long-lived, an assessment of strategies is also needed, and therefore I will also discuss theoretical explanations regarding the use of violent or nonviolent strategy and strategic choices when movements are faced with repression.

4.3.1 Why movements emerge?

4.3.1.1 Underlying factors

A few underlying factors are found through quantitative theory testing to correlate with the emergence of civil resistance movements (Chenoweth, 2021). These include having a large population, a ‘youth bulge’ of citizens between 15-24 years old making up a disproportionate part of the population, an urban population, many people with telephone subscriptions, a large manufacturing sector and existence of social organizations. Chenoweth also found that as a country becomes more repressive it is more likely that there will be a nonviolent uprising, meaning that human rights abuses, political offenses, and the rise of authoritarianism often are correlated with whether an uprising takes place (2021).

Many factors have also been found to not have any systematic relationship with whether a particular country will experience a civil resistance uprising in any given year (Chenoweth & Ulfelder, 2017). These factors include a country’s wealth, poverty, level of education, recent armed conflict, ethnic or linguistic fragmentation, type of autocracy, economic growth, or inflation. Even though these factors do not systematically show a relationship with uprisings they could still be part of the background of why populations resist.

4.3.1.2 Moral shocks and critical events

The role of moral and emotional motivations is a key to explain why people initiate and participate in collective action in authoritarian or high-risk settings (Pearlman, 2013, 2018; Smith et al., 2001). Short-term triggers for motivation are usually unique to each movement and are both difficult to anticipate and hard to recognize as they are happening (Chenoweth, 2021). Motivation to participate could be triggered by a moral shock or a critical event.

A moral shock is where an event or a situation raises such a sense of outrage in people that they become inclined towards political action. A dramatic change in everyday life and in the status quo is often experienced by people as very acute (Della Porta, 2016). Critical events could be a coup d’état or a stolen election. The Arab Spring started when a street vendor set himself on fire in Tunisia after being harassed by municipal officials (Goodwin, 2011). This example is one of many showcasing that “a single event can abruptly push (...) mass dissatisfaction to erupt into the open” (Kuran, 1989, p. 138). Moral shocks in authoritarian regimes are often related to acts of state

repression. Such repressive events could back-fire on the oppressor leading to increased mobilization against the regime rather than stall movements (Martin et al., 2018).

4.3.2 How movements emerge and endure?

4.3.2.1 Overcoming Collective Action Problems

Movements are coordinated efforts by a group of people with shared interests to achieve a common objective. This raises the question of why and when individuals choose to engage in collective action rather than be a passive bystander (Lindekilde & Olesen, 2015; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

Collective Action Problems (CAP) has widely been applied as a theory of understanding individuals' motivation for participation in political action and social movements. The most used definition stems from Olson (1965) who defined CAP as a problem which arises when the benefit of an action is not exclusive to those that participated. Olson holds that common interest is often not enough to motivate people to participate. Individuals, except in small groups, will prefer to freeride even if they have claims and especially if they receive the same benefits as those actively participating with larger stakes in the claim and feel represented by them (Olson, 1971).

Overcoming CAPs is key for any civil resistance movement to emerge. CAPs are intensified in cases where there is high risk, such as in authoritarian regimes where people may risk their lives through participation. Different assessments of risk and the fact that risk could decrease when more people participate can explain how CAPs are overcome even in closed autocracies. Lack of information about people's true preferences is often a key obstacle to overcome CAPs in authoritarian regimes. Kuran (1989) states that under authoritarian rulers most people do not reveal their private thoughts and feelings for fear of persecution, and it can therefore be hard to see if a regime is unpopular as people keep their grievances concealed.

Mass mobilization is often highlighted for overcoming CAPs. Numbers matter and when many people engage in nonviolent resistance the risk level usually decreases and opens for broader participation. Individuals are more likely to engage when they expect or witness large numbers of people participating. This is because their perception of risk may decline when many are joining, and informational difficulties are overcome when movements are public and out in the open. Stephan and Chenoweth (2011) highlights that over space and time, large campaigns are more

likely to succeed than small campaigns, and the more diverse the participation is in terms of gender, age, religion, ethnicity, ideology, profession, socioeconomic status etc, the more difficult it is for the adversary to isolate participants and adopt a repressive strategy short of maximal and indiscriminate repression.

Non-violent resistance often includes different activities for citizens with varying risk levels and does usually not require a specific skillset for participation (Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011). This is seen as essential for enabling participation from a wide segment of the population including children, women, and elderly. In comparison, armed resistance often requires physical skills such as agility, endurance, willingness to train, ability to handle and use weapons, and often involves isolation from society at large. The personal sacrifice involved in armed resistance is huge and the typical guerilla warfare regimen usually only appeals to a small portion of a given population. Participation in non-violent resistance often provides an opportunity for people to return to their jobs, daily lives, and families.

4.3.2.2 Collective identity and grievances

Collective identity is at its most basic level a shared sense of ‘we-ness’ and ‘collective agency’. (Benford & Snow, 2000; Snow et al., 1986). The experiences of a sudden and dramatic increase in intense grievances can explain the emergence of strongly felt moral motivations to act collectively, especially in the early phase of resistance (Chen et al., 2017; Hess & Martin, 2006; Martin et al., 2018). The formation of a collective identity could also be described as cognitive liberation where a large group of people collectively decide that a grave injustice has occurred and that they must take joint action to create change (McAdam & Snow, 1997). Once a collective identity has been formed those individuals will often not be willing to go back to a time where they were unaware of or willing to tolerate what they perceive as injustice.

Pearlman has found evidence of strong collective emotional states and its impact on motivation and participation through her interviews with activists involved in the Arab Spring uprisings (Pearlman, 2013). She found that people can overcome fear and leap into resistance by feelings of outrage combined with joy, pride, and hope.

Grievances stem from perceived injustices or atrocities. Grievances could derive from unequal distribution of power or wealth in a society, persistent poverty or identity-based deprivations (Cederman et al., 2011). According to scholars of grievance-based approaches grievances such as

poverty or repression of specific groups often lead to conflict and are vital to understand the origins of violent conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Gurr, 1970; McAdam, 2001; Oberschall, 1994; Tilly, 2003). However, many scholars argue that grievance in itself is insufficient to explain the outbreak of conflict as grievances do not necessarily always motivate populations to rebel, rather they could explain why populations rebel and not if and how. (Collier et al., 2009; Giugni et al., 1999; J. Goldstone, 1991; Tilly et al., 1998).

4.3.2.3 Leadership and Mobilization Bases

The role of leadership and mobilization bases are often highlighted by SMT as important for the emergence and endurance of social movements. Mobilization bases can refer to the pre-existing groups, networks, organizations, and alliances within a context. As showcased in chapter 3, such mobilization bases could in the case of Myanmar be the earlier democracy movements and the pre-existing CSOs, and these could play a role in explaining the emergence of the Spring Revolution as such mobilization structures provide a basis for future struggles to take place. The social movements that are most likely to survive, according to Tilly and Tarrow (2015), are the ones that draw on preexisting social networks or create self-sustaining organizations.

The role of leadership of social movements has widely been discussed by scholars and there is no consensus yet regarding preferred type of leadership or whether having a charismatic leader is a necessity for movements. Existing research suggests that leaders are critical to social movements as they “inspire commitment, mobilize resources, create and recognize opportunities, devise strategies, frame demands and influence outcomes” (Morris & Staggenborg, 2004, p. 171). Individual charismatic leaders such as Gandhi, Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela are often highlighted as essential for their movements. However, focusing too much on great and charismatic leaders might risk neglecting the structures through which people are mobilized into a movement and how a movement is organized. Having a too strong emphasis on leaders and their role in social movements might also diminish the critical role of mass participation and participants might simply be characterized as followers and not as own agents for change (Barker, 2001).

Chenoweth (2021) highlights that leaderless resistance is one of the characteristics of contemporary revolutions and uprisings, where many have succeeded without having a Gandhi, King or Mandela as their figurehead. It is hard to identify a single charismatic leader in the 2019 revolutions which took place in Sudan, Algeria, and Lebanon (Stephan & Gallagher, 2019). A

leaderless model might make sense both for tactical and ideological reasons. Avoiding entrusting a single figurehead could be based on strong political reasoning especially in contexts where movements are resisting authoritarian leadership.

“Movements that are too closely associated with a single individual or personality may make people uneasy if they’re looking for a more democratic, accountable system. The consensus seems to be that if a movement wants to appeal to a broad range of people, it’s best not to rely too much on a single personality.” (Chenoweth, 2021, p. 125).

If there is no clear leadership it is tactically harder for governments to single out their adversaries, for instance by decapitating the movement through arrests or detainments, or by subverting it through infiltration (Chenoweth, 2021). Leaderless movements could appeal to a broader segment of society without a clear ideological steer, especially for people fighting against oppressive structures, hierarchy, and corruption. Black Lives Matter is one example of a movement which has moved away from individualistic models, and which instead has adopted a federated coalitional structure. (Chenoweth 2021). “The need to develop and recognize leadership is often in tension with the need to avoid re-creating or reinforcing oppressive structures” (Chenoweth, 2021, p. 123)..

The embracement of leaderless resistance could also be overestimated and could doom a movement’s ability when moving from awareness raising to tasks that require longer-term coordination and resources. Such leaderless movements could be characterized by less disciplined nonviolent action. Movements that fail to develop skilled leadership are more vulnerable to being decapitated, co-opted or to just simply make fatal mistakes which well-organized movements with strong leadership most likely would avoid (Chenoweth, 2021).

4.3.2.4 Expansion of Political Space and Strategic Choices

Many theorists of social movements have argued that political and economic structures determine whether movements fail or succeed (e.g. McAdam et al., 1998; McAdam & Snow, 1997; Meyer & Tarrow, 1998). The four dimensions of POS as distinguished by McAdams could be useful to assess how movements can operate, but might be somewhat limited in relation to closed autocracies with an emphasize on for instance elite alliances and political institutions (McAdam et al., 1996). The openness or closedness of political space is not only dependent on political institutions. Political space could also be discursive and dynamic and thus shaped by social

movements, even in closed autocracies as seen in Myanmar. Discourse could play an important role in shaping the political space in the sense that claims and struggles are either enabled or constrained by certain discourses which narrate the meaning of actors, issues, identities and activities in a certain manner (Gleiss, 2017). Political space is also dynamic as the perceptions of discourse can change as actors articulate meaning in new ways and engage in power struggles. “Claims and counterclaims do not occur randomly, they take their shape from surrounding regimes, cultures and institutions. They respond to a regime’s opportunities, threats, and constraints.” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 111).

The theoretical framework of contentious politics is useful as a perspective to understand how actors respond to structural contexts and how contexts in turn are altered by the actors when power and interests come into play (Beck et al., 2022; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015).

“*Contentious politics* involves interactions in which actors make claims bearing on other actor’s interests, leading to coordinated efforts on behalf of shared interests or programs, in which governments are involved as targets, initiators of claims, or third parties. Contentious politics thus brings together three familiar features of social life: contention, collective action and politics.” (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 7).

When governments are faced with unarmed revolutionary challenges, they most commonly combat them with brute force (Chenoweth, 2021). Extreme brutality against unarmed civilians is an effective strategy from the regime to deal with protesters but it could also back-fire and be risky as there is always a possibility of alienating own supporters. “Of the nonviolent revolutions between 1900 and 2019, regimes responded with lethal repression 88% of the time (and 94% of the time against violent revolutions)” (Chenoweth, 2021).

Brutal repression from the regime is often a turning point, and the ability to shift and adapt strategies is vital to the survival and durability of movements. When faced with brutal repression there is a range of strategies that movements could apply as efforts to minimize damage. Some movements are successful in keeping their momentum by carefully and tactically responding to the problems inflicted by repression (Chenoweth, 2021). Movements could temporarily regroup to plan their next moves, and this can make sense when it is too risky for public action. Movements could then focus on other efforts such as building parallel institutions. Some movements change

strategy from being nonviolent to violent either by choice or improvisation. Other movements die or disintegrate (Davenport, 2015, 2022).

Organizational cohesion refers to how well movements are able to keep people unified through a shared strategy or collective idea (Chenoweth, 2021). Existing research suggests that strong organization is one of the most important factors in helping civil resistance campaigns survive repression. Fragmentation is the opposite to organizational cohesion. If movements become fragmented or divided, ultimately this could lead them to dissolve.

Repression could trigger movements to use violence and this in turn could backfire by provoking more violence from the state (Hess & Martin, 2006; Sutton et al., 2014). Repression could also lead to an increase of attention and awareness and thus lead to more people joining. According to Chenoweth (2021) it is usually hard for movements to have both diverse participation and fringe violence at the same time, thus they would have to choose. Movements that start out nonviolently and then start to engage in violent acts often tend to alienate women and marginalized groups, this could also be groups which are more likely to be targeted in a crackdown, such as people of color (Davenport et al., 2011).

Political spaces are not only external opportunities and constraints for a movement but can also be constructed and widened by movements. Developing parallel institutions is quite a common strategy for civil resistance movements. It may be hard for nonviolent mass uprisings themselves to resolve systemic governance problems such as lack of independent institutions, corruption, or inadequate power-sharing mechanism (Chenoweth, 2021). Many movements have engaged in parallel state- or institution building to foster legitimacy and authority. Parallel institutions are often unofficial social, cultural, economic and governance systems or practices. They are parallel as they work outside and separately from the existing systems of the regime. They are often successful when they can meet community needs which are not met by the existing system (Ho, 2022).

Scholars and practitioners disagree on the best timing for the effectiveness of building such alternative institutions. For instance, practitioner Gandhi thought that it was useful as a first step in the nonviolent campaign that he led as he believed it was from these institutions Indians would be able to claim true independence from British colonial rule. On the other hand, “Sharp believed that campaign leaders should establish parallel institutions at the end of a campaign, once a

revolutionary coalition has gathered enough momentum and backing to ensure that these newly created institutions would include all those invested in the movement” (Chenoweth, 2021, p. 51). Some ethnic minorities in Myanmar have longstanding experience with parallel state building and have had their own systems running for decades, for instance own education and health care. The civil resistance movement in Myanmar following the coup has also engaged actively in parallel state building in opposition to the military regime.

To sum up, I have now covered theoretical concepts and explanations for why and how movements emerge and endure.

4.4 Theoretical Assumptions

Based on the theoretical and conceptual framework I present theoretical assumptions related to the case of the emergence and endurance of a civil resistance movement in Myanmar following the 2021 military coup in a closed autocracy.

The outcome for Myanmar’s political future will be determined by contentious politics, meaning the political struggles between the military dictatorship and the ethnic and political opposition. The outcome will depend on the capacities and strategies of the civil resistance movement.

There are existing similarities between the Spring Revolution and earlier struggles of civil resistance against autocracy in Myanmar. There are differences related to preconditions and strategies of earlier democracy movements which should be addressed further, such as the widespread use and knowledge of digital technology.

The Spring Revolution has been able to emerge and overcome collective action problems because of the joint outrage and defiance caused by the nature of the 2021 military coup.

The strategic choice of using nonviolence from the beginning was crucial to lower the threshold for participation and overcome CAPs. The emergence of CDM as a general strike civil disobedience campaign was important to attract a wide group of workers and civil servants and unify these groups into a broad-based movement. The youth played an important role in mobilizing the larger population and introduced new and creative forms of nonviolent resistance.

Pre-existing mobilization structures and protest legacies such as the 88 uprising and Saffron Revolution has had an essential effect on the new movement’s employment of a range of methods

and strategies, as well as the ability to adapt and shift strategies whilst confronting the military regime. This was especially evident when the security forces cracked down on protesters. The development of strategies included both violent and nonviolent forms of resistance. The growth of violent resistance first originated from the youth in direct response to state repression but might also have stemmed from past civil resistance and former experience of armed resistance both via students and the EAOs.

The lack of leaders due to the arrests of ASSK and others from the NLD leadership created a space for leaderless resistance to emerge. This vacuum was necessary for the emergence of multiple leaders from various social movement bases including youth, students, ethnic minorities, trade unions and CSO members and to create opportunities to expand political space within a closed autocracy.

5.0 Methodology

In this chapter I present and discuss the methodological approach of this thesis. I start with my research design and justify why a qualitative theory-guided case-study is the most suitable approach to answer my research questions. Thereafter, I outline how empirical data was collected through fieldwork, the recruitment of informants and how the interview process unfolded. How I processed collected data for analysis will be described and reflected upon. Finally, ethical considerations, limitations and biases will be discussed.

The research project has been approved by Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research (see Appendix E). The processing of personal data has been handled in accordance with the requirements in data protection legislation and guidelines from Sikt.

5.1 Research Design

The purpose of this study is to answer the following research questions:

- 1) *What enabled the civil resistance movement in Myanmar to emerge after the 2021 coup?*
- 2) *Why is the civil resistance movement in Myanmar after the 2021 coup long lived despite brutal repression from the military regime?*

The RQs are explanatory, meaning that I seek to explain the causes of something that has occurred or is happening (Halperin & Heath 2020).

5.1.1 Qualitative Theory-guided Case Study

For any research design the objective is to be able to answer the research questions with as much validity as possible. I have chosen to carry out a qualitative theory-guided case study with Myanmar as a single-case unit. The qualitative research design and case study method is advantageous to examine complex issues and mechanisms to explain empirical outcomes or patterns. It is widely applied when researching political phenomena and includes the great advantage of close examination of a single case (Geddes, 2003; George & Bennett, 2005; Halperin & Heath, 2020). There is a lack of in-depth knowledge and case analysis on actors resisting autocracy (Cassani & Tomini, 2020; Tomini et al., 2023). This thesis is a contribution to help fill that gap.

Case studies could be divided between being theory-testing or theory-generating (Gerring, 2007; Lijphart, 1971; Yin, 2009). The use of the case study to generate new theory and hypotheses where none exist might be one of the most important uses of this research method (Halperin & Heath, 2020). Given the presented puzzle of civil resistance in the closed autocracy of Myanmar following the 2021 coup, and lack of in-depth knowledge about the case, I find a case study which is based on existing theory and with the potential to nuance theory, as the most suitable.

Case studies are often characterized by high internal validity and are by many deemed as less ideal when it comes to external validity (Halperin & Heath, 2020). The strength of the case study as a method is that it allows for in-depth and detailed analysis of political phenomena and usually enables a good match between theory and evidence. Thus, case studies generally have high internal validity. The main weakness of the case study is the challenge of external validity and generalization to other contexts deriving from a single case. Even though some of the findings deriving from this single case study might be unique to the context of Myanmar, the mechanisms and enabling factors that are present for a movement to emerge and endure in a closed autocracy could be useful for contemporary movements elsewhere. The aim of this thesis is to provide findings that are useful to better understand the contemporary case of Myanmar and to go beyond particular observations to also offer insights valuable to study cases of civil resistance against closed autocracies elsewhere.

Data collection through embedded research, or ethnographic fieldwork, where the researcher embeds in the research setting to generate a first-hand understanding is particularly useful for studying sensitive topics, unpacking difficult-to-define, or complex phenomena where other research methods may fall short (Jacobs et al., 2021; Krause, 2021). Data collection through fieldwork is beneficial to get a better understanding of why people act as they do but also simultaneously enables the researcher to make sense of and interpret the data whilst in the field (Weden 2010). Given the sensitive topic at hand, lack of in-depth knowledge since the 2021 coup, and my previous experience of conducting fieldwork I deemed this as the best choice for collecting data.

5.2 Data Collection

My primary source of data is semi-structured research interviews with activists and individuals from the Spring Revolution in Myanmar conducted during fieldwork in the Thai Myanmar border region. These interviews have enabled me to gain greater insight into a phenomenon that I deemed would not be possible to access to the same degree with existing, publicly available data. The data collection have enabled me to get the bigger picture, move beyond the official accounts and storylines, and to be able to better understand how actors make sense of and understand certain phenomena (Fujii, 2010; Krause, 2021). In addition to the semi-structured research interviews as my primary source, secondary sources include media articles and other publicly available documents.

5.2.1 Fieldwork

I conducted fieldwork in Northern Thailand in the Thai Myanmar border region for six weeks, starting in December 2022 and ending in January 2023. I carried out 46 semi-structured interviews with activists and individuals from the Spring Revolution (see Appendix A for informant list). The informants included key stakeholders such as youth, students, workers, journalists, politicians, civil servants, CSO members and trade union members. These were individuals which identify as part of the revolutionary movement which emerged in response to the 2021 military coup.

Fieldwork was conducted in what could be described as a revolutionary setting with on-going civil war inside Myanmar and a movement actively deciding and applying its strategy to pressure the military regime. It is a challenge to study movements and individuals in such settings, but at the same time a commonly used and necessary approach to be able to investigate phenomena as they are still unfolding.

Due to brutal repression from the military regime the space for the movement to operate in-country is limited and comes with a heightened security risk. Since the coup many individuals from the movement have fled from Myanmar or gone into hiding in-country or in neighboring countries. Many have fled to towns and populated areas close to or along the Thai Myanmar border or India-Myanmar border. From here many have continued in various forms to sustain the movement.

I previously conducted fieldwork in central and northern Myanmar in 2015 for my BA-thesis on the 2015 election and political representation of ethnic minorities in Kachin-state. Through this as

well as from professional work I have established a contact network with political activists and civil society actors in Myanmar. I used this existing network as a starting point to assess the feasibility of conducting fieldwork and to recruit informants, in addition to new contacts provided to me by my academic supervisors at UiO and PRIO. I carried out a few background conversations with members of the Burmese diaspora in Norway and experts on Myanmar from Norwegian civil society. An initial interview guide was developed and applications to Sikt submitted and approved during the fall of 2022. I began mapping potential informants in the winter of 2022 ahead of departure for fieldwork. I anticipated that I would be able to successfully collect data during fieldwork, but it was difficult to assess how much and to what extent before arrival.

5.2.2 Recruitment of informants

Before recruiting any informants amongst the universe of potential interviewees I identified the most relevant categories of individuals through a broad purposive theoretical sampling. Meaning those most essential and fruitful to talk to according to my theoretical framework and assumptions, ultimately enabling me to answer my RQs. I aimed to talk to individuals and activists who identified as part of the Spring Revolution. Broadly, I categorized informants into stakeholder groups such as youth or Gen Z activists, students, political activists, members of trade unions, CSO members and others. It was an important consideration to not limit my sample too much due to the risk of excluding any potential important contributions from other actors, such as journalists or politicians. I aimed not for a strict representativeness in my sample but rather a balanced number of informants based on the loosely pre-defined categories. The number of informants in the end depended on theoretical saturation as a guiding principle and practical considerations.

I used the snowball method to recruit informants. I reached out to potential informants ahead of departure, but the main phase of recruitment happened upon and after arrival. After a few interviews the snowball started rolling and I got access to many potential informants from different sources. Most informants were willing to assist me get in touch with others. Throughout the process I mapped and categorized the informants, both those I had interviewed and those I wanted to interview. I kept track to ensure I would interview a broad sample, and throughout the recruitment process I was cautious to avoid selection bias and potential gatekeepers.

To access informants who only spoke Burmese I hired a local translator. The use of a translator could have several implications which I considered including content being lost in translation, the

translator having an own agenda or strong personal opinions, security risks involved for the translator and risks of confining the pool of informants. The translator was recommended to me by a colleague and had background as a student activist who had fled after the coup. Before conducting any interviews together, it was essential to discuss and agree upon practicalities around the interviews and build trust and confidence to avoid any misunderstandings. The translator had access to informants which were recruited by the translator to take part in my project based on discussion by each case. The translator also assisted with reaching out to Burmese-speaking informants which I had recruited through snowballing. When it was possible, I conducted interviews in English. Around half of the interviews were conducted in Burmese with interpretation to English and the rest in English.

5.2.3 Research Interviews

Semi-structured research interviews as a method provided me the opportunity to prepare a questionnaire survey on thematic areas of interest but also left room for potential follow-up questions on topics which emerged naturally (see Interview guide in Appendix C). This allowed me to be flexible whilst conducting interviews to adapt the interview guide with modifications if necessary. I believe this approach facilitated the informants to speak more freely. At the end of interviews, I always opened for the informants to add anything or pose questions. Sticking with the semi-structured interviews with both structured and unstructured questions was a useful method to get as many details as possible and was natural given the understudied theme and need for an exploratory approach.

I conducted both in-person and online interviews. The length of interviews on average lasted between one to two hours each. The location of interviews was subject to each informant's choice, especially to keep in mind any unnecessary security risk. Most interviews were carried out in-person, but I also conducted online interviews either with informants who deemed this as the safest or most practical option. This enabled me to get an increased representation from ethnic minorities located in Myanmar or elsewhere in Thailand, and opportunity to talk to individuals from the movement still active inside Myanmar. The online interviews were synchronous meaning that they took place in real-time, except for one asynchronous interview which was conducted via messages on a crypted app.

Most interviews were carried out with one informant, but I also carried out group interviews with more informants simultaneously, five at the most. The group interviews allowed for useful observation of dynamics and revealed agreement or disagreement on topics. My aim was to carry out individual interviews as I deemed that most would speak more freely in this format, though I stayed open to group interviews to not lose out on informants who would prefer to meet up together.

I collected qualitative data which included data categorized as “red data”, meaning that they cover especially sensitive information such as ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, sexual orientation, and identity. I continuously stressed that participation in the project was voluntary, and I provided sufficient information for informants to make informed choices about participation and potential risks before asking for informed consent (see Appendix D for consent form and information letter). The processing of data has been dealt with confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). I am the only one with access to the data and I have ensured that it is stored with security measures such as encrypted files and two-step verifications processes.

In most cases interviewees consented to audio-recording. Interviews were recording via UiOs “Nettskjema-diktafon” mobile application developed for safe storage and aligned with privacy guidelines. I stored files in “UiOs storage hotel”. The use of “Nettskjema-diktafon” provided extensive data security whilst in the field as no files were stored locally on my mobile device, thus risks of potentially compromising data if the device was stolen were avoided. Prior to fieldwork I deemed informants might not want to speak freely if recorded and the potential risk of collecting personal voices through data collection. Regardless of whether informants consented to be recorded or not, I always supplemented with notetaking to capture observations and note down reflections.

5.2.4 Data reduction, coding, and analysis

With the data collected from 46 conducted semi-structured interviews from fieldwork I first had to reduce the amount of data to a manageable level. Full transcripts of all interviews presented a massive amount of verbal data which would have been challenging to analyze, especially given practical considerations of time constraints. I therefore reduced the amount of data through a selective transcription. Meaning that I typed up all my handwritten notes which covered the most

essential part of the interviews. In some cases, I supplemented from audio recordings where my notes were either lacking or I had to confirm specific details.

I used NVivo to process the extracted data. I systematically organized the data by coding it into themes which enabled me to start identifying patterns and relationships. The themes were either pre-determined in the sense that they were drawn directly from my interview guide or themes that emerged from the data. The thematic coding enabled me to analyze and find meaning emerging from the collected data. An overview and description of the themes are placed in the initial codebook in Appendix B.

5.3 Ethical considerations, limitations, and biases

My own judgment as a researcher has been essential to make thorough decisions both prior to, after and whilst in the field. Continuously it has been important to consider context-specific challenges and ethical issues related to the sensitive nature of the political situation in Myanmar with on-going violence and armed conflict. It has been especially relevant to avoid causing any harm to participants in the form of increasing security risks or inducing re-traumatization. It has been necessary to assess what informants have sacrificed to participate, for instance in time, loss of income or any political or personal risk. It has been important to be transparent on the aim of research, its methods and what it can result in to not raise any unrealistic expectations. Moreover, to clearly state that participation in the project was voluntary and informants could optout at any time without providing a reason. Throughout the process it has been essential for me to be mindful of my own positionality and to reflect upon norms and culture.

5.3.1 ‘Do No Harm’ and Security Measures in Field

Doing no harm is an important guiding principle and part of conducting ethical research. Harm includes “research that might involve such things as discomfort, anxiety, harassment, invasion of privacy, or demeaning or dehumanizing procedures” (Bailey, 1978, p. 384). In my fieldwork, I expanded this to also cover security risks which in worst consequence could endanger the life of informants given the political context these individuals are operating within.

To not cause any harm to myself, my translator or to research participants, the security situation in the field had to be constantly evaluated. At the time of departure, it was deemed as safe to travel to Northern Thailand even with on-going hostilities taking place in the Thai Myanmar border

region. Upon arrival word by mouth was that there was a heightened security situation especially due to visits and collaboration between Thai and Burmese police and military authorities leading to an increased risk of arrests for Burmese citizens staying undocumented in Thailand. The UNHCR resettlement process had been stalled and many were ‘stuck’ in Thailand in a situation of facing threats if returning to Myanmar whilst staying in Thailand would mean doing so illegally without documentation.

At the time of data-collection it would have been possible to travel into Myanmar. My assessment was that it would have been ethically unsound and be associated with high security risks, both for me personally and for any informants who would likely be at increased risk. I deemed that it was more fruitful to focus my attention on Thailand as the main location of data-collection, given that security risks were much smaller and ethical considerations manageable. Another important factor of consideration was that it would likely be easier to recruit informants who would be able to speak more freely given the sensitivity of issues in addition to avoiding causing any harm to participants or unnecessary risk. The India-Myanmar border region was also a considered option. Due to an existing established network in Thailand, information about many activists being located along the Thai Myanmar border, additional time constraints and efforts needed to familiarize with a new geographical location in India and get access to a new group and build trust, I chose Thailand as the most feasible location. If time had allowed, it would have been interesting to conduct fieldwork in both places to get a bigger picture and access to a broader group of informants, also for the sake of comparing.

Whilst conducting fieldwork I carried out several security and safety precaution measures. I used only ‘approved’ drivers when either travelling to or from informants or providing a ride for informants or my interpreter, especially to avoid arrests from Thai police and not cause any unwanted attention. I always let the informant decide where to meet up and held interviews based on security judgments. I stayed flexible to allow for any last-minute changes in time and place. I ensured that I had a location feasible to conduct interviews in privacy as a back-up and as an alternative to offer informants. I attempted to stay up to date on current events in the area and got connected to both locals and internationals to access relevant information. My translator was also helpful in assisting with discussing and considering security measures. I chose to operate within a closed research setting due to the sensitivity of issues and in accordance with safety measures.

Meaning that I did not publicly reveal that I was carrying out research except to those directly involved. This was also a tactic to not cause any unwanted attention to me, my project or cause any potential harm to those participating.

To build trust and to protect informants I provided confidentiality to all individuals who participated in my research project, regardless of whether informants themselves approved of their identity being public. I always asked for informed consent and stressed that to participate in the project was voluntary and one could withdraw consent at any time in the process. I provided information about potential risks involved. I ensured anonymity of informants through ensuring that identifying information was concealed. For instance, I never wrote down any identifying information in my handwritten notes but used made-up codes or pseudonyms and I encrypted files with contact details or other sensitive information.

Having the flexibility within the chosen method of semi-structured interviews and being able to amend the interview guide was useful in relation to doing no harm and being aware of not causing any discomfort, distress, or anxiety. Some informants got emotional, and it was in some cases evident that the political theme was highly personal to them. For instance, some chose to disclose traumatic experiences where I remained open to listen to what they wanted to tell but never nudged them to delve deeper into sensitive topics. I also stressed that it was possible to pause or stop interviews at any time if needed.

5.3.2 Positionality

My positionality and identity as a young Norwegian female researcher may have affected the interviews and interview process, in terms of power dynamics, gender, ethnicity, cultural differences and language. Furthermore, this shaped how I was perceived by informants.

Power dynamics could play out in various ways between rich and poor, old, and young, male, and female, as well as in other context-specific relations. The most obvious power dynamic in my fieldwork was present between my translator in the sense that the translator was economically compensated in a challenging time where paid work was hard to come by. Dealing with this power dynamic meant that I had to be aware and as transparent as possible. It did not cause any conflict and I do not believe it was a hindrance for the translator carrying out the agreed assignments.

Gender can either help or restrict researchers as in some settings one can get easier access to certain groups or one could be hindered because of traditional gender norms. In my case, gender did not hinder me from accessing informants and I received a fairly gender balanced recruitment of informants. My identity as a young female researcher may have made me less threatening and easier to build trust with and it might have contributed to lower the risk of speaking openly and participating in the project.

Ethnicity and nationality can influence informants. My parents are from Norway and South-Korea, and questions around my origin usually comes up due to curiosity and often functions as an icebreaker when travelling in Southeast Asia. Sharing Asian heritage could also be beneficial in creating some sort of bond and reducing the foreignness; however, informants rather liked to discuss Norway's role and engagement in Myanmar. My prior knowledge and experience of formerly having lived in Myanmar was perhaps a more significant part of my identity which I think provided confidence to informants that I was genuine and trustworthy about my project. Several informants curiously questioned my experience and current interest for Myanmar, and I believe this also helped create an atmosphere of trust in the interview setting.

Having formerly lived in and worked with Myanmar over many years I had already developed a cultural sensitivity. However, I was in a new setting and context post-coup and had to refamiliarize myself with the new social norms and structures amongst informants, especially given the sensitive political context.

In terms of language there was a barrier as I cannot speak Burmese except from a few standard phrases. My interpreter bridged this language gap with the informants. Being able to conduct interviews in English when possible, and communicating with informants who knew a little English but felt more comfortable speaking in their mother-tongue, made me comfortable that the interpreter was translating truthfully, in addition taking an active role in asking clarifying questions and confirming what informants had said.

5.3.3 Limitations and bias

The findings presented in this thesis depend exclusively upon my interpretation of meaning hidden in the collected data. The choices I have made to minimize, emphasize, or exclude data are prone to be discussed considering the issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability of the

research. In relation to my choice of research design and specifically related to fieldwork and data collection through semi-structured interviews issues related to transparency, replicability, potential gatekeepers, confirmation, and selection bias will be addressed.

According to Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 11), “the meanings emerging from the data have to be tested for their plausibility, their sturdiness, their “confirmability” – that is, their validity”. In other words, whether the findings I present in this thesis deriving from the data collected are credible, defensible, and able to withstand alternative explanations. Moreover, to what extent the findings and results are consistent with the data collected and thus reliable, and whether the study has validity in the sense that it does investigate what was intended and is able to answer the RQs.

When conducting fieldwork both the positionality and subjectivity of the researcher comes into play. It is not given that the same conclusions or findings would be formed and interpreted in the same way even if fieldwork is conducted with the same method by another researcher. There is a problem in terms of replicability that is ever present with fieldwork. It is challenging or so to say impossible for a researcher to duplicate, and the positionality of another researcher may be met with different reactions from informants or not be able to get the same type of access (Halperin & Heath, 2020).

The issue of transparency in being able to show the steps from data to analysis is more problematic than with most quantitative work, not only is it time-consuming to make a huge load of information transparent including field notes and transcripts of interviews. Ethical considerations are often a barrier. To ensure anonymity and protect informants I have chosen not to disclose detailed interview transcriptions for the data collected for this thesis.

When recruiting informants there is a risk of selection bias. I believe that this was overcome through my conscious choice to not stick with any key informants, but constantly broaden my pool of informants to include different groups and snowballing not within a selected group only, but in several groups simultaneously. Interviewing political conscious people may have led to an overemphasis or exaggeration of how experiences of the military regime have been conveyed and could question the internal validity of collected data. It is possible that informants have had an interest in portraying issues as negatively as possible. I am aware that this may be a factor in my collected data where the majority are politically conscious individuals, however, I sought to have representation from as many as possible and ensure that informants were both individuals with and

without prior political experience and engagement. Additionally, it is also natural that those engaged in the movement are politically conscious individuals and given the political aspects of my research questions I also targeted to recruit them.

A selection bias could have emerged from potential gatekeepers (Mac Ginty et al., 2021). The local translator I hired was to some degree a gatekeeper. Meaning that the translator introduced me to a set of informants which the translator already was familiar with, had to put own safety first and continuously assess risks in relation to meeting new individuals. Specific informants were also gatekeepers, for instance, some being hesitant in assisting me to reach out to their friends and colleagues, others by wanting to guide me in one direction and others by having to approve me before giving access to their group. Because I was never dependent on a sole informant to keep the snowball rolling, I managed to avoid a specific selection bias and I did not encounter an issue of drying up my pool of potential informants.

It was challenging to know when saturation would be achieved. I felt that I achieved a theoretical saturation when specific themes and narratives repeatedly emerged during interviews. For instance, many saying the same about how CDM emerged, how they felt about the coup or talked about the same strategies being applied. I had to end data collection due to time constraints and the limitation of the thesis, not because of lack of available informants. After 46 interviews I had enough empirical data to answer my RQs, and this was a representative sample which could provide credibility to the findings of this thesis.

Whilst analyzing data I have consciously tried to avoid any potential confirmation bias such as incorrect reporting, incorrect use of information or any deliberate attempt to hide data or highlight something disproportionately to its true existence. It has been important for me to keep an open mind during interviews despite previous knowledge or assumptions. Through a theory-guided approach without set hypotheses it has been possible for me to draw meaning directly from the data also in terms of which theoretical concepts or explanations best capture or fail to grasp what informants highlighted. This has also helped me address gaps in theory which do not sufficiently explain the collected data.

6.0 Analysis

In response to the 2021 coup in Myanmar a large-scale and multifaceted anti-coup and pro-democracy civil resistance movement emerged showcasing a clear mismatch of the military's perceived legitimacy, authority, and support from the population. The Spring Revolution mobilized fast, grew exponentially, and soon gave credibility and legitimacy to new political stakeholders challenging military rule.

Considering existing research and theories on actors that resist closed autocracies the civil resistance movement in Myanmar would be expected to be short lived when faced with brutal repression, as it was in 1988 and 2007 (Mathieson, 2007; Than, 2013b). Nevertheless, the movement today is still active as a viable alternative and an opposition hindering the military in Myanmar from full control over population and territory. This presents an interesting puzzle which is also the point of departure for the research questions of this thesis.

This chapter is based on data collected from fieldwork and the application of theoretical concepts and explanations from the fields of civil resistance studies and social movement studies. I will analyze the emergence and endurance of the Spring Revolution in Myanmar following the 2021 coup.

First, I will analyze why the movement emerged through the concepts of moral shock, critical events, and collective identity, and assess underlying factors. Secondly, I will analyze how the movement emerged and overcame collective action problems. As part of this I will discuss the role of the first movers of the movement. Thirdly, I will analyze the role of leadership and mobilization bases and discuss leaderless resistance. The factors explaining emergence are also relevant to explain the endurance of the movement, thus I will fourthly extend these, and analyze endurance through a discussion of the applied strategies of the Spring Revolution. I will assess the movement's choice between violent and nonviolent methods, ability to shift and adapt strategies when faced with brutal repression and how the movement operated within changing political opportunity structures. Lastly, I will summarize the key findings.

6.1 Why the Spring Revolution Emerged

I argue that the military coup as a critical event was decisive for the emergence of the civil resistance movement to rise in 2021. The coup and backslide to autocracy triggered a moral shock in the population and explains how a collective identity was formed from new and pre-existing grievances. A collective identity formed through the development of an anti-coup discourse and was later expanded and strengthened with the embracement of a transformative pro-democracy and federal discourse, which also included demands from the ethnic resistance. This enabled an expansion of the movement through successfully drawing on mobilization bases in Myanmar in the form of existing networks, organizations, and alliances.

Informants emphasized that the 2021 coup came as a surprise and that it triggered them to take some form of action. An informant said: *“Everyone was surprised by the coup. It was a power abuse. We had to fight back.”* (Interview 1). Another said: *“Coups were a surprise, the 2008 constitution made it possible, the military already had a lot of power.”* (Interview 4).

The military coup staged on Feb 1st 2021 could be described as a single event (Kuran, 1995) and a transformative event (McAdam, 2001; Tilly et al., 1998) acting as a triggering factor which sparked people into collective action and thus gave life to the Spring Revolution. Without the military coup it is difficult to anticipate and less likely that such a large-scale civil resistance would have emerged at the given time. The 2020 election and allegations of fraud from the military could also be seen as a critical event relevant for triggering the movement and part of why the military carried out the coup d'état. One informant said: *“My personal motivation was the voting fraud and the personal experience (...) they [military] were lying about the election”* (Interview 45).

Individuals' thoughts and feelings about the coup showcased that people of Myanmar experienced a moral shock. Many informants expressed their outrage and described the coup as a power abuse. One informant said: *“Clearly it [coup] was a power abuse”* (Interview 5). Another described the coup as: *“An unjust military power take-over”* (Interview 6). Many informants highlighted how the coup triggered their motivation to act either individually or collectively. One informant said: *“We had experienced a taste of democracy and it was not possible to go back.”* (Interview 7). Another said: *“I did not want to live under dictatorship. I had to organize. I had no previous political background or engagement”* (Interview 15). Yet another said: *“Before the coup I never*

engaged in politics. (...) I feel the same way as the people, and I want to fight back” (Interview 16).

Many, and especially the youth, felt devastated and were not willing to sacrifice the freedom and democracy they had started to enjoy (Irrawaddy, 2021c; Jordt et al., 2021). The Gen Z had grown up witnessing two previous elections in 2012 and 2015, and many cast their first vote in the 2020 elections with belief and confidence that Myanmar would continue a path towards democracy.

A Gen Z informant said:

“Everyone had the same feeling on February 1st. No one thought it would happen, we were surprised, they cut out the internet, we got very angry and furious. They detained political leaders and we had to bring them [military] to justice” (Interview 35).

Once people realized they felt the same way about the coup a collective identity started to form (Loong, 2021). The early risers of the movement communicated the coup as a power abuse and injustice to the people of Myanmar. How the coup was communicated played a significant role in how the collective identity started to form amongst those participating in the streets to take an anti-coup stand. The framing included shouting slogans, singing songs and other symbolic actions such as showing the three-finger salute known from Hunger Games (Irrawaddy, 2021e). In the beginning claims were based on an anti-coup discourse rejecting the coup, demanding restoration of democracy, respect for the 2020 election results, and release of political leaders and prisoners (Kyaw Zwa Moe, 2021). In comparison to individuals from the Burman majority population, many individuals from ethnic minorities were more hesitant to join the anti-coup movement. Some perceived it as a struggle between the military and Burman majority population and were skeptical of political claims wanting to restore status quo which would mean a continuation of repression of ethnic minority groups (David et al., 2022; Khin Khin Mra, 2021; Kumbun, 2021).

The collective identity also derived from grievances. New grievances developed from blaming the military and from feelings of loss of democracy and future opportunities. Importantly, grievances existed in Myanmar long before the 2021 coup. Grievances amongst ethnic minorities existed from decades of civil war and atrocities from the military (Callahan, 2003; Guan, 2007). Pre-existing grievances were also present within the pro-democracy communities given protracted military rule with systematic repression and targeting of activists.

A political awakening amongst the Burman majority population helped to develop a collective grievance crucial for further development and strengthening of the collective identity that had started to form after the coup. This awakening was especially spearheaded by youth who showed solidarity and gained an increased consciousness and understanding of past grievances of the ethnic minorities (Jordt et al., 2021). The formation of a General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN) also increased attention to oppression of ethnic groups in Myanmar (Kyed, 2021) Once an increased understanding about ethnic issues became prominent, particularly visible in the public about the Rohingya, participants in the anti-coup movement started to show solidarity with these previously excluded and marginalized groups (Nikkei Asia, 2021a). Thus, placing pre-existing grievances alongside the newly developed grievances from the coup.

When the discourse of the movement expanded from anti-coup to a transformative pro-democracy discourse including calls for federalism, ethnic minorities and the Bamar majority group in Myanmar became united through a strong collective identity (David et al., 2022; Khin Khin Mra, 2021; Stokke & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2023; Vrieze, 2023). Going back to status quo was no longer enough, instead the movement wanted to transform and pave way for a more inclusive and diverse democratic system in Myanmar. Overthrowing the military regime was no longer the end-goal, but simply a first step (Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, 2021). In addition to moving beyond a return to the status quo the movement wanted to right the wrongs of the past. This embracement of transformative claims reflected political issues at the core of Myanmar's struggles. Demands from both the longstanding ethnic resistance and the pro-democracy movement were now included and enabled an expansion of the movement (Zwe Mahn, 2021). These transformative claims quickly received wide-spread support and the movement grew by including an increasing number of relevant stakeholders from Burmese society (Hmung, 2021; Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). This expansion drew on existing mobilization bases and included representatives from ethnic minority groups and CSOs such as for instance the women's movement and LGBTQI+ movement. Groups who had not been united prior to the critical event and moral shock of the coup were now unified in a common struggle through a collective identity and together made claims (Fawthrop, 2021; Irrawaddy, 2021b; Nikkei Asia, 2021a).

A few pre-existing factors could also help understand why it was possible for the Spring Revolution to emerge when it did. The key factors correlating with emergence of civil resistance

movements outlined by Chenoweth (2021) align well. Myanmar has a large population of approximately 55 million. There is presence of a ‘youth bulge’ with around 28 per cent of the population being youth and adolescents aged between 10 and 24, and around half of the population is under 30 years old according to the latest 2014 consensus (United Nations Population Fund, 2016). The urban population is 31 per cent (World Bank, 2023c). There has been a significant increase in mobile cellular subscriptions. Only 1 out of 100 people had a telephone subscription in 2010, this increased to 80 in 2015 and 126 in 2021 (World Bank, 2023b). Moreover, the manufacturing sector has experienced rapid growth, in 2019 accounting for 25 per cent of GDP (World Bank, 2023a). Lastly, there was an existence of social organizations.

To sum up, the formation and transformation of a strong collective identity was triggered by the 2021 coup and was built from new and pre-existing grievances. This has been crucial for securing the significance of the movement and for the ability to stay long-lived through unifying groups and expanding the movement. It also showcases a difference from civil resistance in Myanmar in 1988 and 2007 where such collective identities were never manifested across ethnic divisions. Prior movements did not succeed in drawing on pre-existing mobilization bases to grow and sustain in the same manner.

6.2 How the Spring Revolution emerged

The Spring Revolution applied nonviolent methods from the onset. A month of festival-like street demonstrations led by youth and workers resulted in the biggest mass mobilization ever in Myanmar with millions of citizens (Anonymous, 2021; Jordt et al., 2021). The public protests started out in urban areas such as the cities of Mandalay and Yangon, but quickly spread across the country, becoming nationwide (Frontier Myanmar, 2021d; Kyaw Zwa Moe, 2021).

I argue that the threshold for participating was lowered due to the non-violent methods applied from the onset. Using nonviolent methods effectively reduced risk and lowered the threshold for participation enabling citizens from all walks of life to join including children, women, and elderly. Witnessing many people joining the streets protests made it easier for individuals to join as the true preferences of the population were revealed. The first movers were essential for rapid mobilization and mass participation. It is not likely that such a huge mobilization would have taken place if the movement had started out using violent means. Nor that the movement so quickly

would rise to be a credible and legitimate actor making collective claims and challenging military rule after the 2021 coup.

6.2.1 First Movers

I will here analyze the emergence of the Spring Revolution by highlighting the unique role of workers who initiated CDM and the “Gen Z” as first movers and early risers.

6.2.1.1 The rise of a Civil Disobedience Movement

There is no consensus on how CDM emerged, and several stakeholders claim they initiated it. Amongst the informants most claim that CDM began with healthcare workers refusing to go to work on the day after the coup. One informant stated: *“I witnessed a lot of doctors, medical workers, and students using strong words to go against the military and were very involved.”* (Interview 7). Another said: *“CDM emerged as an option to solve the coup within days or months. (...) All sectors actively took part, because of the Covid-19 pandemic, doctors and health workers decided to leave Covid-19 centers and hospitals and they influenced to other sectors”*. (Interview 1). A third said: *“People were quite scared. Would someone take the lead? Fact – the workers started it [the movement], heated debate on who created the movement inside Myanmar. Many groups want to take credit, I have seen it clearly that it was the workers.”* (Interview 20).

Many claim that CDM was initiated and spearheaded by a leading doctor from the Medical Family Mandalay (MFM). One informant said: *“CDM was started by the doctor in Mandalay, really a trigger and starter for the movement. NLD liked to negotiate. The CDM was a movement driven by the people, not politicians.”* (Interview 46). Another said:

“Medical workers started the CDM, especially a doctor from Mandalay. People blamed them for working together with the military, a lot of activists know him as a doctor and medical organization with a huge network. It spread very quickly, used social media and youth were very involved.” (Interview 9).

The doctor initiated a meeting with a group of medical peers from the hospital of Mandalay and other hospitals across the country to discuss what to do in response to the coup. One informant said: *“I joined the meeting with the doctor in Mandalay. We wanted to create a movement in a nonviolent way.”* (Interview 33).

Amongst informants interviewed from the healthcare sector, few had prior political experience, but felt strongly that they should reject the military coup and were not willing to serve under a military regime. Many felt that it was their duty to serve the people and that the Hippocratic oath of ethical standards stood above the commands of commander-in-chief MAL. One informant said:

“(...) the first day after the coup, I came to the hospital with a very heavy mind, I do not want to work for the military. (...) I tried to resign my job, but unfortunately the office was closed at that time. On the 2nd of February I started CDM together with my colleagues (Interview 39).

Healthcare workers stopped showing up at work as an act of disobedience (Frontier Myanmar, 2021b). Many of these early risers resigned from their positions and refused to work under military rule. Medical workers from public and private hospitals, medical institutes and Covid-19 testing centers quickly joined. Many of the largest hospitals in Myanmar were impacted early on (Frontier Myanmar, 2022a). The on-going Covid-19 pandemic at that time possibly enabled mobilization of the medical community as there were no pre-existing trade unions for health care workers. During the pandemic the medical society had built up stronger networks for communication and increased trust with the population.

Some claim that NLD initiated CDM, though most informants stated that there was no clear instruction or strategy in place from NLD on how to respond to the coup. One informant said: *“There was no plan from NLD. They won the election and fought for power with internal conflict and power dynamics with the military.”* (Interview 25). Another said: *“NLD underestimated the institutional force of the military, could have prepared for the coup but many were not aware, it depended a lot on NLD”* (Interview 30), whilst a third said:

“Decisions in NLD without Aung San Suu Kyi? Or Min Ko Naing? There was no instruction coming from NLD or preparations after Aung San Suu Kyi and others were arrested. Not sure what to do, nothing from the party to the MPs.” (Informant 44).

Some stressed the importance of a statement from NLD calling people to go out to the streets and create a nonviolent movement (Frontier Myanmar, 2021a). Others highlighted a statement from Min Ko Naing, former protest leader and prominent member from the 88-generation urging for a leaderless revolution and nonviolent movement (Myanmar Now, 2021). One informant said:

“NLD gave a message to do civil disobedience. Top official members asked people to join in. (Interview 38). Another said: “Min Ko Naing and Ko Jimmy [88 generation] mentioned a movement and it went viral. Everyone in the central executive committee of NLD were arrested.” (Interview 44).

In my view, it appears that both the NLD and the 88-generation took part in the momentum created early on by the healthcare sector and showed support to CDM. It also seems like several individuals and stakeholders were developing strategies simultaneously on how to best respond to the coup.

Around the same time as CDM became public rumors and speculations about a 72-hour ban rose. This ban was described by informants as a warning not to go out in the streets and protest for 72 hours as this could immediately cause a violent response from the military. It is unclear who initiated the ban. Informants argued that it derived either from NLD or USDP. Those claiming that it was spread by NLD argued that it was imposed to buy more time for negotiations between MAL and ASSK, whilst others claimed that the rumors were put out by the military to avoid mass demonstrations. The 72-hour ban caused confusion. Individuals either felt they should abide, or it was actively rejected. One informant said: *“I did not understand why the 72-hour ban. I met with medical staff, we talked on how to take action and motivate the public servant law”* (Interview 14). Another informant said: *“We were asked to please wait 72-hours. The UN will come if we stay nonviolent. The Mandalay CDM doctor did protest too early, I blamed him”* (Interview 24). Despite the ban, individuals mobilized against the coup and joined CDM.

To sum up, CDM was launched from health care workers despite confusion with a 72-hour ban, and quickly provided an alternative for collective action against the military.

6.2.1.2 Uniting workers and civil servants in acts of civil disobedience

CDM experienced spontaneous growth within a matter of hours and days. As one informant stated: *“CDM spread like a wave.”* (Interview 15). Spearheaded by the medical sector CDM quickly grew to include civil servants and workers from both the public and private sector in Myanmar (Anonymous, 2021; Frontier Myanmar, 2021b). Civil disobedience was a convincing strategy that tried to enforce a state collapse and force the military to hand back power to the civilian government. One informant said: *“The emergence of CDM was a good way to pressure the different sectors such as health and railroad (...). Huge shock [for the military]. I think that this was quite successful.* (Interview 29).

The education and health sectors are seen as two core groups of CDM due to the large number of civil servants from these sectors that joined (Frontier Myanmar, 2021b, 2021c). Other sectors and groups also joined in, such as harbor workers, garment factory workers, transport workers and many more (Frontier Myanmar, 2021e; Ko Maung & Campbell, 2022; Lin, 2021; Lin & Haack, 2021). One informant said: *“CDM consisted of mostly government officials.”* (Interview 3). Another said:

“There was different motivation for different sectors. Doctor’s oath, disobedience, defying dictatorship, not leaving patients behind and wanting the downfall of coup. CDMers don’t think about salaries and positions in the beginning.” (Interview 1).

The education sector became the largest sector represented in the movement. As stated by one informant: *“(…) the education sector was most powerful. 200,000 joined, 150,000 from basic education only (…)* it was one of the strongest pillars of CDM.” (Interview 37). From primary to tertiary education, teachers, and professors, as well as rectors and principals joined in denouncing the coup within the first days and weeks. One informant from the education sector said: *“I refused to work [as a basic education teacher], when CDM became viral I decided to join.”* (Interview 37). The rapid mobilization of teachers stemmed from the role and engagement of teachers serving as polling station officers during the 2020 elections. Following the announcement of the election results teachers were accused of vote fraud and threatened by USDP. One informant said:

“Teachers joined very early and had a critical role. Teachers were very upset about the military blaming them for election fraud. Very upset with accusations and many fear they would be arrested, they announced they would take action.” (Interview 18).

In relation to these accusations, individual teachers and trade unions had started to mobilize prior to the emergence of CDM. As one informant said:

“Teachers organized and made a statement. We knew that we were honest about the election. Also, the election commission and NGO observers. Teachers were involved as polling station officers, also other teams witnessing our work.” (Informant 42).

The mobilizing role and organizational experience of the trade unions in Myanmar should not be underestimated in explaining the rapid growth of CDM (Lin & Haack, 2021). Since 2011, trade unions were no longer illegal to form in Myanmar and trade unions have grown significantly in

terms of active members and have secured many victories in their efforts to strengthen labor rights (Henry, 2015). The Myanmar Federation of Trade Unions (MFTU) and Confederation of Trade Unions in Myanmar (CTUM) issued statements ahead of the military coup on January 29th and prepared to mobilize members of trade unions to join in a civil disobedience campaign if the 2020 election results were not respected. As one informant representing trade unions said:

“The atmosphere in the unions. We think that it [the coup] will happen. (...) How CDM started. CTUM issued a statement in the end of January to decide to respect the election and urge for disobedience. (...) Since February 1st leaders [of trade unions] started to talk about what to do, discuss next steps, did not want the coup to happen, it is a power abuse. (...) Worker unions and leaders are very familiar with protests. We have been fighting for our labor rights since 2015. How can we make a quick movement? We are familiar with strikes and demonstrations. There is high trust in the worker union leaders, why we could easily talk to people and the workers (Interview 41).

Trade unions played a crucial role in mobilizing workers, both from the public and private sector (Irrawaddy, 2021d; Ko Maung, 2021; Ko Maung & Campbell, 2022). One informant said: *“Garment factory workers started the street protests in Hledan in Yangon on 6th February. Doctors started CDM (...) but we organized the mass protests”* (Informant 32). The Federation of Garment Workers in Myanmar (FGWM) actively encouraged their factory workers to first strike outside of the factories during their lunch break, as stated by one informant: *(...) February 5th was salary day and we decided to show solidarity. (...) Around 12.000 workers joined (...) and were singing slogans outside of factories on February 5th.*” (Informant 41). Workers also joined the street demonstrations and trade unions made this possible by organizing transport for workers and other security measures.

Civil servants from ministry departments and elsewhere joined CDM (Drechsler, 2021; Irrawaddy, 2021d). Workplaces were important arenas for mobilization. Starting from their offices in Nay Pyi Taw bureaucrats resigned their positions and encouraged colleagues to join. Initially many were recruited through the Red Ribbon campaign. This was a campaign where individuals symbolically showed resistance to the coup wearing red ribbons. One informant said:

“I worked in treasury and financing. I saw a lot of doctors joining CDM. I wanted to join. A lot of people joining from departments. They notice that I am engaged and that I

encourage people to join. (...) It was hard to get civil servants to join, last group to join.”
(Interview 18).

Another said: *“I worked in Nay Pyi Taw in the development committee, private and civic government staff. (...) There I initiated a Red Ribbon campaign for people to join the movement.”*
(Interview 24). Whilst a third said: *“Red Ribbon photos was an unconditional method to organize from one ministry to the next. Very popular way of showing support to non-violence.”* (Interview 15).

To sum up, CDM was effective in mobilizing workers and civil servants from both private and public sector in acts of disobedience against the military.

6.2.13 The ‘Gen Z’ early risers

Many informants highlighted the leading role of youth as critical for the emergence of the Spring Revolution. One informant said: *“The revolution was led by Gen Z youth”* (Interview 8), another said: *“The youth were active in leading anti-coup demonstrations”* (Interview 6), and a third said the movement was *“(…) led by youth with huge losses. Taste of democracy. Older generation more cautious.”* (Interview 46). A fourth said:

“Gen Z, young people taking leadership roles, mostly young and under 25 years old. Generation over, those over 30 years old and with experiences of 88 generation and Saffron revolution have fear and blame young people. There was a big gap. Significant with the young people.” (Interview 18).

The youth were not willing to give up the ‘short taste of democracy’ and were amongst the first movers (Irrawaddy, 2021c; Jordt et al., 2021; Lintner, 2021b). A Gen Z informant said: *“Youth sense that it is unjust, a lot of lost opportunities. Lost five years and there was a sense of injustice, especially for me since I was interested in politics.”* (Interview 35). Another said:

“I joined after February 9th and I did not want to go back. We had to get out from our trapped situation. First participated in nonviolent strikes, do not want to go back into the trap, we need change in Myanmar.” (Informant 25).

The role of students was highlighted, as one informant said:

“Students have been politically involved since the 1920s and students joined in 2021 with CDM. Students were crucial for CDM to emerge and they supported non-violence.” (Interview 3).

Youth and students often play a crucial role at the forefront in civil resistance movements (Brooks, 2016; Dahlum & Wig, 2020; Guzman-Concha, 2012; International Crisis Group, 2023b). One explaining factor is that their life situation allows more time for activism, in addition students are often part of politically conscious environments which could explain why so many students engage in societal struggles. Students have been part of longstanding civil resistance in Myanmar (Hong & Kim, 2019).

Youth actively campaigned online to show the world and international community what was happening. Being tech savvy youth managed to quickly spread messages in social media to mobilize and raise awareness (Lintner, 2021; Schimpl, 2021). One informant said:

“(...) In 2021 it was mostly young people, we from the 88 generation and older, we were mostly blind in those days and did not know technology. 2021 was very different. Gen Z and age of information and technology. Not possible to cheat and mislead in the same way.” (Interview 23).

The youth played a role in effectively urging the older generations to take part. Many from the older generations were initially more hesitant to participate given their previous experience living under military rule, being former political prisoners and having either lived or known experiences with violence and oppression. As one informant said:

“The youth around 30 or 20 years old were very actively included. Those people from 88 generation, over 40s did not actively join the street protests in the same way, maybe only for a few days because it would be seen as shameful if they were not supporting.” (Informant 19).

The Gen Z paved the way with creativity and a variety of non-violent methods showing dissatisfaction and a refusal to accept military rule (Jordt et al., 2021). As one informant said: *“February was like a festival with all the creativity from the youth”* (Interview 13). Another said: *“It was getting bigger every day. Young Gen Z activists with popular culture, like a festival especially in Yangon.”* (Interview 18). A third said:

“It started more like a popular culture. Young people did not have past experience and had their own idea of protests. They were more relaxed, and I think that’s main reason for why so many joined, including models, actors and influencers. It was like a big trend, no one stayed inside, and it was not dangerous in big groups, people were posting photos and selfies.” (Interview 18).

A Gen Z leader said the following about initiating new forms of protests: *“I led a drum revolution group during the Spring Revolution. I had friends playing drums at cheerleading games and thought that was a good and active way to organize.”* (Informant 11).

To sum up, youth played a significant role in mobilizing people to join the Spring Revolution. They were part of the early risers and first movers and contributed to creating a safe space for the public to demonstrate their collective will.

6.2.2 Overcoming Collective Action Problems through Nonviolence

I argue that the use of nonviolent methods from the onset of the Spring Revolution was crucial to overcome CAPs. This will be discussed below, with special attention to the use of mass demonstrations and a civil disobedience campaign.

6.2.2.1 Mass Demonstrations

The use of mass demonstrations as a nonviolent method was a success in terms of rapid mobilization and in overcoming CAPs in the Spring Revolution. A diverse group of individuals and actors were involved. Mass demonstrations took place via grass-root mobilization, spread from urban to rural areas and quickly became a nation-wide tactic for displaying defiance against military rule. As a first choice of strategy, the use of mass demonstrations could be explained by the wide-use and pre-existing knowledge of mass-demonstrations as a tool for public dissent (Brooten, 2021). This could have been inspired from the use of mass demonstrations in movements elsewhere or from the experience of previous movements in Myanmar who largely mobilized public dissent via street protests such as the 88-uprising or Saffron revolution.

One informant described the mass demonstrations as: *“People power through non-violent street protests.”* (Interview 14). The mass demonstrations grew spontaneously in size. One informant said: *“The first protest was very small with just a few people in Mandalay. We started to protest*

around the palace and made plans to protest more on the streets, shouting slogans and raising three finger salute. More and more people joined, maybe 10.000.” (Interview 7).

The mass demonstrations were planned by a variety of leaders and groups. Strike committees were set up at different levels ranging from city to township or were loosely organized. One informant said: *“A lot of different groups and committees emerged.” (Interview 3).* Another said the demonstrations were: *“Based on online campaigns. (...) different organizations and actors organizing and doing different things, they had meetings to plan.” (Interview 41).* Yet another said: *“Each and every day there were different themes, and mostly slogans were communicated in Burmese. Strikes and protests were organized across the country. (...) Around 40 striking committees involved in organizing every day.” (Interview 32).*

The use of social media, and the increased digital competency was important for quick mobilization through both sharing information and documenting the street demonstrations (Nikkei Asia, 2022; Rao & Atmakuri, 2021; Schimpl, 2021). As one informant said: *“Organizing online campaigns. (...) It was a turning point with technology. A lot of difficulties back in 1988. Using new methods now. Not effective with government propaganda in the same way.” (Interview 1).* Another said: *“Now we use public information, phones, sending information, main different thing from earlier, sharing via internet and social media.” (Interview 11).* A third said:

“It was getting bigger every day. Everyone was coming together. Social media played a role and social influencers. (...) Big force, very organic, different organizations, the whole country were chanting slogans. (...) Very organic and decentralized only in small teams coming up with different ideas. Good strategy. Hard for the military to crack down on more than one group. Even if crackdown in one place, still something going on in another place, huge strength in the beginning.” (Interview 18).

The use of mass demonstrations played a significant role in showcasing the popular will and public dissent with autocratic rule following the coup. They were effective not only in showing that the military did not have support by the public, but also in showcasing what was happening in Myanmar to gain international support. The increased use of technology, especially spearheaded by the youth, played a significant role in rapid mobilization. The use of nonviolent mass demonstrations reduced risk and provided a low threshold action for citizens from all walks of life to engage.

One of the reasons why contemporary nonviolent civil resistance movements fail is because they rely too heavily on the use of mass demonstrations without developing and organizing other techniques of mass noncooperation such as for instance general strikes or mass civil disobedience which are potent methods for imposing economic and political life (Chenoweth, 2021). An overreliance on mass demonstrations could make movements more vulnerable but may also be related to how many movements increasingly rely on digital activism and organizing, especially via social media (Chenoweth, 2021). Even though the Spring Revolution started out with mass demonstrations as one of the first methods of noncooperation this was accompanied by CDM, and soon also included other nonviolent methods and tactics. Additionally, a pre-existing mobilization base with trade unions, networks, organizations, and others got activated and played a crucial role in institutionalizing and expanding the movement beyond the streets and social media.

6.2.2.2 Civil Disobedience

In parallel to the mass demonstrations, a civil disobedience campaign was initiated as a form of noncooperation with the military regime. The main objective of CDM was for workers and civil servants to defy military rule by joining a general strike and stop going to work as an act of civil disobedience (Tin Maung Htwe, 2022).

CDM succeeded in enforcing disruptions in basic services of the government and almost enforced a state collapse, hindering the military from economic and political control (Anonymous, 2021; Frontier Myanmar, 2021e, 2021g; Oo, 2021). The civil disobedience campaign was effective as a nonviolent strategy to strike the pillars of support for the government. Importantly, CDM showed that the military did not have control. As stated by one informant: *“Spring Revolution is very strong because of CDM, it did not exist in the past. The largest one in the country’s history. Students take part in all the movements, but not civil servants.”* (Interview 14).

One important strategy to recruit CDMers was to offer compensation for loss of pay. This strategy was mainly driven by NUG or trade unions who had funds available or elevated funds through fundraising and public donations (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2021). It varied to a large degree, who received compensation. One informant said: *“Compensation for CDM disappeared after first 1-2 months.”* (Interview 1). Another said: *“More than 400,000 CDMers. Not possible to give 1 lakh to each, need to initiate a system, programme support until now and still giving some emergency fund.”* (Interview 33). A third informant said: *“Every day, promising*

a quick way to topple the regime, false promise, only some small compensation provided. Their whole life dedicated to the struggle, no income, false promises, forced to quit their jobs.” (Interview 30).

Many of those recruited to CDM believed in a swift victory and a revolution that would last only a matter of days or weeks, not drag on for years. With this belief they willingly gave up their jobs and incomes and committed themselves to the movement. As one informant shared: *“CDM emerged. Think of CDM as an option to solve the coup within days or month.”* (Interview 1). Another said: *“CDM is now the forgotten part of the revolution. (...) Some regret that they joined, do not know much about politics, and think that it will be over very fast.”* (Interview 42). A third said: *“Many joined in a short amount of time, then met with punishment, very high commitment in one way or another, a lot of issues, cannot change our political mind and tell us to go back, but many are struggling.”* (Interview 14).

The military attempted to call civil servants and workers back to the offices and factories. They provided bribes for those willing to come back in the early period. Later their strategy shifted to targeting CDMers, especially those from the medical and education sector (Irrawaddy, 2021a). One informant said: *“Friends who are now jobless. With CDM a very hard situation, had to rely on family income, a lot of disappointments for whole families and rise of living costs. University professors that have been jailed.”* (Interview 31). Another said:

“Every doctor feels the same as me and we do not want to join the military and work under the military general. (...) CDM and non-CDMers. A lot of colleagues go back, some join the military and the military watches every doctor’s movement. If I stay at home and I am CDM I will be arrested, the military need high skilled doctors.” (Interview 39).

Some of the informants either told personally or about colleagues who regretted that they joined CDM being heavily targeted by the military and forced to live a life in hiding without possibilities of an income. One informant said: *“(…) After two years CDM are struggling with living expenses, especially those in the education sector, still people that are encouraging them to join CDM and there is a conflict there”.* (Interview 40). Another said: *“CDM face a lot of pressure, bread winners and many lose housing, some went back to their jobs, cannot blame them, dutiful and loyal to the country, non-violent method is the most important way to change the county, but very difficult.”* (Interview 32).

Every oppressive regime is dependent on pillars of support (Lakey, 2018) , these could be for instance security forces, economic elites, bureaucrats, organized labor or other stakeholders. Being able to pull these pillars of support away is known as an effective strategy to enforce change. CDM was effective in attempting to remove the military regime’s pillars of support to weaken the regime, especially in relation to the withdrawing labor force and public servants in key sectors such as health and education, and managed to impact the economy (Frontier Myanmar, 2021e, 2021g, 2022a; Lian Bawi Thang, 2023). There were relatively few loyalty shifts from the security apparatus and large-scale defections were not triggered when the police and military started to use brutal force on peaceful protesters, except for a few exceptions where mostly low-ranking junior officers resigned and joined CDM (Kyed & Ah Lynn, 2022; Ye Myo Hein, 2022a). The widespread use of violence from the Myanmar military, for instance with the examples of mass killings and genocide of Rohingyas, could help to explain how the use of violence and brutal repression has become normalized within the security apparatus (Parmar et al., 2022). Another explanation could be the strict control and monitoring of soldiers and their families, and that they are economically dependent on the military (Kyed & Ah Lynn, 2022). Anyhow, it is useful to better understand how defections could be triggered.

An informant and CDM member who had defected from the police said the following about joining CDM:

“I wanted to show solidarity with the people even if there were risks involved and I would be seen as a traitor from the institution. (...) Could be put in jail for 1,5 years, maybe even more. The risk, even if I don’t join, could still be reported as deserted or arrested without a warrant. (...) I publicly announced when joining CDM and became a suspect within hours (...) my senior colleagues reached out and said I could come back, but I will not be part of the institution anymore, will not be part of cracking down on people and brutally oppress. (...) I made my decision, everyone knows, I don’t want to be a tool in oppressing the people.” (Interview 16).

An informant and defector from the military said the following about the decision to leave:

“I decided to leave after a speech where they told us to shoot protesters in the head. (...) Fear, desperation, felt loss but I did not think about food or anything, only that I had to move and get a safe place and I could find out about other things later. (...) When you join

CDM, military officers' risk their life and are letting go of careers. (...) There would be more casualties once the resistance got stronger, military soldiers could also be killed by revolutionary forces. (...) Many deserts or get killed in the frontline but the military is holding the data closed (...) building narrative of the public against the military. (...) A lot of brainwashing in the military, been going on for months or years, but we can still walk open via the internet and share information in closed circles". (Interview 22).

CDM as a civil disobedience campaign was partially successful. It helped to achieve mass mobilization amongst workers but only partially succeeded in removing pillars of support from the government. CDM still plays a role as part of the Spring Revolution and many workers and civil servants are still involved in various ways, for instance with providing services as part of the strategy of parallel state building. CDM still has widespread support even though many have returned to work under military rule. One informant shared: *"Don't think that CDM is strengthened today, but not weaker either."* (Informant 37).

In sum, the application of nonviolent methods from the onset was crucial for CAPs to be overcome in the Spring Revolution as highlighted with mass demonstrations and a civil disobedience campaign. The nonviolent methods reduced risk and offered a low threshold alternative enabling citizens from all walks of life to join in as the true preferences of the people of Myanmar were revealed.

6.3 A Leaderful Civil Resistance Movement

"No leaders, no followers, all leaders and all followers" (Informant 33).

Without a single leader the Spring Revolution manifested itself from the onset as a people power's movement (Frontier Myanmar, 2022c; Myanmar Now, 2021). I argue that the movement should be characterized not as a leaderless resistance, but as a leaderful resistance movement. Protesters in Hong Kong coined this term to highlight that it was misleading to characterize their movement as leaderless (CIVICUS, 2019; Hong & Kim, 2019; Hui, 2019). In Myanmar multiple leaders emerged from existing mobilization bases with varied backgrounds and are playing active roles in the movement on different fronts and in diverse ways (Stokke & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2023). The strategy of a leaderful resistance eventually led to credible and legitimate political stakeholders

emerging from the movement to challenge military rule. Through tactical choices they succeeded to expand political space in a closed autocracy.

After the 2021 coup, many were waiting for a single leader to emerge to provide guidance on how to maneuver the political situation. Cultural and historical expectations were highlighted by several informants in explaining the anticipated waiting period for leaders to emerge and the perceived need of having to follow a leader. One informant said: *“Many were afraid and waiting for someone to take initiative. Waiting to confirm rumors about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi having escaped”* (Interview 25). Another said: *“There was no leadership and no prominent leader.”* (Interview 18). A third said:

“We were waiting for leaders. Religious, cultural, or ethnic leaders. It is the culture in Myanmar. A leader leading the group. It was the hottest topic as most leaders were arrested. Many left including Min Ko Naing and others. In the very early stage, we were waiting to know what to do. (...) We had to fight back. The people were waiting for someone to lead them. Few were thinking about alternatives.” (Interview 1).

ASSK and other prominent and senior leaders of NLD were immobilized on the sideline as they got arrested and detained by the military at the day of the coup (Lintner, 2021a; Ye Myo Hein, 2022a). I argue that this vacuum was what made the emergence of new leaders possible. NLD and the 88-generation did nevertheless play a role. The call to action from NLD urging people to respond nonviolently alongside the statements from prominent 88-generation former student leader Min Ko Naing was most likely useful in triggering a response stating that everyone can rise to be a leader (Frontier Myanmar, 2021a; Mon Mon Myat, 2021).

Since ASSK engaged in Burmese politics after the 88-uprising she has been idolized as a single charismatic leader, as the figurehead of the pro-democracy movement and as the party leader of NLD. In the last decade she has been seen in-action in official government positions to huge disappointments for especially ethnic minorities, and actors from civil society as she and NLD did not deliver on the political promises of federalism or peace and reconciliation. (Fumagalli, 2021; Khin Khin Mra, 2021; Kyaw Hsan Hlaing, 2021; Kyed, 2021; Loong, 2021; Thawngmung & Noah, 2021; Vrieze, 2023). It is possible that activists actively wanted to steer away from the movement nursing a new generation’s ASSK, and rather put their faith and hopes into a different

strategy this time around with the Spring Revolution. One informant shared the following related to the role of NLD and the creation of new leaders:

“NLD elders, their time will soon be over. Young people should figure it out themselves, good chance for themselves. Every revolution, change of power. Every generation is creating new leaders. Every revolution has created its leaders. Do not know who the leaders are. Also, the military want to have a known enemy. Do not want to repeat. Do not want anyone pushed into a leadership role. I am sick of it. (Interview 34).

As mentioned, even though no single leader emerged from the Spring Revolution multiple leaders did rise. One informant said:

“(…) multiple leaders are hard to resist [for the military]. Had to collaborate. Shared understanding. A political figure would announce such and such strategi on social media, and then we implement and copy. Daw Aung San Suu Kyi was not present, we needed new faces, new leaders to talk to the people. (...) Mobilizing the whole community, so many involved.” (Interview 20).

Workers and youth in Myanmar, quickly rose to the challenge of becoming the first leaders of the Spring Revolution. They could be described as the first of many leaders of the leaderful resistance.

Whilst the military were cautiously observing street protests during the initial stage, individuals within the Spring Revolution took advantage of the existing political space to agree upon and launch new political stakeholders to challenge the military regime (King, 2022; Yamahata & Anderson, 2022b). Status quo was transformed with the emergence of new political stakeholders which could apply pressure to the movement in line with the movement’s collective claims.

First, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) emerged as a parliament constituted from the elected Members of Parliament (MPs) with mandate from the 2020 election results and popular demand from the Spring Revolution (CRPH, 2021). Second, the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) was formed as a consultative council consisting of networks, political parties, organizations, and participants from the Spring Revolution including ethnic minorities. In a federal democracy charter launched 31st March 2021 NUCC called for the formation of a civilian government (Htet Myet Min Tun & Moe Thuzar, 2022). Third, the National Unity Government (NUG) was launched 16th April 2021 (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar,

2021). The pre-existing political monopoly of NLD in the pro-democracy movement was challenged with a more representative government. NUG included ethnic minorities in key minister positions (Vrieze, 2023). As a political actor, NUG represented something new, more diverse, and inclusive in Myanmar politics, also aligned with the collective identity after the coup and the combination of struggles from the ethnic resistance and pro-democracy movement (Htet Myet Min Tun & Moe Thuzar, 2022). These new political stakeholders provided a viable political alternative to autocratic rule and were introduced at a crucial time as the military soon limited the political space by brutally cracking down on the movement.

There is always a risk that uprisings could end up in disillusionment and recrimination despite beginning with enthusiasm and solidarity (Mathieu, 2021; Zolberg, 1972). As seen with the Spring Revolution and rise of multiple leaders, disillusionment was to a large degree avoided after the first phase of street protests and acts of civil disobedience. The new political stakeholders were built from and supported by existing mobilization bases (Stokke & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2023). This helped ground these new political actors and ensured that they continued to showcase the will of the movement. CRPH, NUG and NUCC contributed to organizational cohesion as the movement continued to grow more diverse and inclusive, importantly by providing more space for ethnic minorities and other previously marginalized and excluded groups. I argue that the creation of these political stakeholders led to a new phase beyond the early days with street protests, and contributed to avoid fragmentation of the movement, as they provided a viable alternative to autocratic rule. Moreover, CRPH, NUG and NUCC took the military regime by surprise and managed to create an unforeseen expansion of the political space which the military was forced to deal with. Perhaps that is why the brutal repression from the military intensified quickly after the launch of CRPH.

The new political stakeholders play a role as part of the leaderful civil resistance unfolding in Myanmar and should be seen as part of the many nonviolent methods applied by the movement. In addition to the political actors, multiple leaders persist and are active both through applying violent and nonviolent means. Next, I will discuss the strategies and tactical choices of the movement.

6.4 Ability to Shift and Adapt Strategies in Response to Brutal Repression

I argue that the ability of the Spring Revolution to continuously adapt and develop strategies in response to the escalating repression from the military regime has been key to its survival and part of the answer of why the movement is durable and long-lived. The case of civil resistance in Myanmar since the 2021 coup clearly illustrates that threats and opportunities co-occur, and that when individuals are engaging in contentious politics they combine responding to threats with seizing opportunities (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, p. 60).

The factors explaining why and how the movement emerged, such as the formation of collective identity, the use of nonviolent methods from the start to effectively overcome CAPs and the leaderful resistance, are underlying and necessary to understand how the movement was able to apply and shift strategies to endure. These relate to how fragmentation was avoided when the movement started to apply a combined strategy, including violent and nonviolent means. I argue that the development and application of a combined strategy is crucial to understand why the movement is still effective in sustaining a constant pressure on the military regime and are successful in providing an alternative to autocratic rule in Myanmar.

In this section, I will analyze how the movement responded to brutal repression from the military through adapting and shifting strategies. This includes discussing the use of reactive low-level protest violence in the form of self-defense and fringe violence, and how the movement also sustained the use of creative nonviolent methods whilst faced with repression. A bigger shift with the emergence of new armed resistance actors such as Urban Guerilla groups (UG) and the People's Defence Force's (PDFs) engaging in traditional guerilla warfare alongside Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) will also be discussed. This shift led to the application of a combined strategy of both violent and nonviolent means. I argue that violent resistance should be seen as reactive in response to brutal repression, and alongside continued application of nonviolent methods such as how the movement has engaged in parallel state building. The ability to shift and adapt strategies, and ultimately the combination of a violent and nonviolent strategy explains why the movement is still long-lived.

6.4.1 Violent and Nonviolent Resistance

The first days of protests went by with the security apparatus simply observing what was happening in the streets. Then the security apparatus started to crackdown use teargas, water cannons and rubber bullets to dissolve protests (Bynum, 2021; HRW, 2022, 2023). A turning point was triggered for the movement when security forces started to fire live ammunition at non-violent protesters (Irrawaddy, 2021g, 2021h). The first killing of a protester was reported on 19th February 2021. This first victim was a 20 year-old woman shot by the military on February 9th (Irrawaddy, 2021f) .

One informant said: *“First killing was a huge shock.”* (Interview 6). Another said: *“Girl killed by headshot. Used live ammunition, seen as threat, military took bodies of those they shot.”* (Interview 7). Yet another said: *“The shooting started. The police tracked down people. (...) increased hate against the military, youth dying at interrogation camps. Youth dying for nothing”.* (Interview 11). A fourth said the following about military violence and the protests in Mandalay:

“Around 10-11 February the police tried to block off with shields and close off everyone inside. Had to intervene, no place to escape (...) trying to follow peaceful procedures, hindering crackdown, using smoke bombs as diversions. (...) Rubber bullets and live ammunition. Hard to tell them apart.” (Interview 7).

A fifth said:

“The military and police waited approximately one month. First girl killed in Nay Pyi Taw. More and more deaths, preparing defense teams, smoke bombs, water cannons. First time experiencing youth defense teams with helmets, shields, but not really safe, very improvised, a lot of them died, could not really defend, lack of training.” (Interview 9).

When the brutal repression started the movement responded in different ways and it triggered a discussion about shifts of strategy from nonviolent to violent means. One informant said: *“After the first killings (...) we need to reflect. We organized small groups for flashmobs. Young people were very emotional. Nonviolence and violence, but we don’t know how to continue. We don’t blame the young people and respect what they choose to do.”* (Interview 29).

Another said:

“The Armed Forces Day was when it shifted from non-violence to violence. The military killed more than 100 people. Molotov cocktails were used, many people were alarmed and talked more about armed resistance. (Interview 20).

In response to violent repression the movement adopted different tactics applying both violent and nonviolent methods (Frontier Myanmar, 2021f, 2021h; Khin Oo Thazin, 2021). Despite high risk, new and creative nonviolent methods were developed and employed. As street protests were largely abandoned, new methods such as flashmobs or peopleless protests emerged (Nikkei Asia, 2021b). Silent strikes and sit-ins were organized (Egreteau, 2022). Individuals also continued protesting through social media, fundraising campaigns and organized themselves online (Ryan & Tran, 2022). As these nonviolent methods were applied low-level protest violence occurred simultaneously through acts of self-defense and fringe violence (Bynum, 2021). Many youths got convinced that they should defend themselves and protesters during street protests when faced with brutal crackdown from security forces (Frontier Myanmar, 2021h). This started out as defense groups inspired by contemporary movements elsewhere, notably Hong Kong (Tung & Kasuya, 2021). Some also reacted to the repression by applying fringe and unarmed violence, such as throwing rocks, using slingshots, or throwing Molotov cocktails.

As repression intensified from the regime and more protesters were killed, many youths wanted to take up arms, not allowing more youth to be sacrificed in the fight for democracy against a superior enemy (ICG, 2021; Loong, 2023). Small groups of youth travelled from urban to rural and liberated areas controlled by EAOs seeking their assistance in armed training. These groups of youth later developed into two different strands of armed resistance, namely the Urban Guerilla (UG) focused on urban warfare and the People’s Defense Force (PDF) engaged in traditional guerilla warfare (Frontier Myanmar, 2021i; Ye Myo Hein, 2022b).

Participation costs increased significantly with the introduction of armed resistance, and this led to a smaller dedicated group of resisters applying violent methods. Many protesters fled the country or became internally displaced, some joined diaspora movements elsewhere or stopped being part of the movement.

6.4.1.1 Various creative non-violent methods

After the violent crackdown a variety of nonviolent methods were applied to continue mobilization. This involved flashmobs, silent strikes, light strikes, and other creative methods of

nonviolent resistance (Egreteau, 2022; Frontier Myanmar, 2021f). Minimizing risk was important and generally smaller groups of individuals would participate. One informant said:

“Trying to adapt all the non-violent tactics from all over the world, Arab Spring, Hong Kong, all that we can. But not Hong Kong or Thai military, nonviolent movement only works when the government allows it, was impossible to carry on. Only small activities taking place now, maybe 5-10 people walking on the streets with a banner, even that is impossible.” (Interview 10).

Flashmobs were organized where a small group of individuals would coordinate to meet up at a specific place for a short demonstration in a public space and then disperse. Usually this would be accompanied by documenting the event on social media for further coverage as well as to keep up faith in the movement. One informant said: *“Due to the crackdown we cannot organize the large protests anymore, evolve into flashmobs”* (Interview 41). Another said: *“We used flashmobs, spread out, different strategies, silent strikes. Most people were still involved. (...) Young people still leading nonviolent actions”* (Interview 1). A third said: *“Flashmobs were taking place and other initiatives like silent movement and flower movement”* (Interview 9).

Silent strikes were another nonviolent method applied where streets were left vacant and empty of citizens, and could have been borrowed from the Gandhian movement’s repertoire of action (Egreteau, 2022). Light strikes included lighting candles as a sign of resistance either in the public or inside households. Singing was also used to show resistance against brutal repression, as one informant said: *“People started singing, Thingyan [water festival] songs, when the military used water cannons.”* (Interview 25).

Banging pots and pans was another nonviolent method which quickly became a nationwide symbol for the Spring Revolution (Phyu Phyu Oo, 2021). It is a method commonly applied by other movements originating from women in Chile protesting food shortages in 1971 (Chenoweth, 2021). In Burmese culture banging pots and pans could relate to chasing away evil spirits, in this case the military (Phyu Phyu Oo, 2021). At a specific time, every evening, households would join in banging pots and pans and the noise signaled that the resistance was still alive. Another creative method of nonviolent resistance emerged from the Women’s Movement who hung up longyis, traditional Burmese clothing, and women’s underwear, which would bring bad luck for men to walk beneath, in this case the police and soldiers targeting activists (Frontier Myanmar, 2021f).

Once initiated, many of these methods of nonviolent resistance quickly spread from one site to another and connected the movement across geographical distances (Bynum, 2021). These activities were still deemed somewhat low risk, thus enabling a continuation of participation after the street protests had ended. Some of these methods were applied by actively copy-cattng and mimicking what had been seen in other movements (Egreteau, 2022). This continuation of nonviolent methods was different from the experiences from the 88 uprising or Saffron revolution where mass participation and visible displays of nonviolent protests died out after the military cracked down.

Participation in public forms of nonviolent resistance was significantly lowered as repression intensified and the military also enforced a more systematic targeting of the movement. Peopleless resistance, for instance through placing objects symbolizing resistance in public spaces continued as well as online mobilization, though not without risk (Ryan & Tran, 2022). One informant said: *“The police were brutally cracking down in other quarters and wards after we started with the light strikes. (...) We continued but had to be cautious.”* (Interview 19). Another said: *“People are keeping up with the flashmobs, still people are getting killed, arrested, interrogation camps. Still fighting and doing what we can.”* (Interview 41). A third said: *“We all demonstrate very bravely, including all of us marching on the streets, but stop when the military started the crackdown. The youth continue, they are risking their lives and bleeding on the streets.”* (Interview 31).

6.4.2.2 Self-defense and fringe violence

Responding to the repression techniques of the military, the movement continued to adapt, not only applying other forms of nonviolent methods but also by introducing self-defense and fringe violence (Bynum, 2021). In such cases where regimes threaten to drive nonviolent resistance movements underground strategic planning and thinking remain a crucial element for successful mobilization (Chenoweth, 2021). Some movements have successfully been able to prevent or reduce oppression (Davenport, 2022; Martin et al., 2018). For instance, movements have trained participants in conflict de-escalation and mapped out possible escape routes if violence should occur. As a response to the use of teargas, watercannons, rubber bullets and later also live ammunition from Burmese security forces, especially youth and students started to engage in self-defense groups and unarmed low-level protest violence occurred (Frontier Myanmar, 2021h).

The movement clearly demonstrated that it adapted to the repression from the military and was successfully able to facilitate a continuation of resistance through the development of defense groups. They made it possible to carry on with mass demonstrations for a longer time span. One informant said: *“We faced brutal crackdown, and we cannot continue. We need to choose streets and roads and march peacefully with a defense line. Need to protect from tear gas etc.”* (Interview 32). Another said: *“The military crackdown, that is for sure, we expected it, over and over again. Gen Z all over the place, self-defense, decide to protect ourselves, crackdown more and more brutal. (...) We organized escape plans and routes. (...) we used slingshots and fireworks”* (Informant 33).

About the different self-defense methods that were applied, one informant said: *“We used fire extinguishers for defense to make sure protesters were safe.”* (Interview 1). Another said: *“We coordinate when to meet up, how long time, scouting and having escape routes. Some cannot join if not safe, mainly we communicate online or via phone calls.”* (Informant 41). A third said:

“We had to change locations. We went into the frontline with banners and flags, waiting for signals and preparing for the police. (...) We used a bannerman, two people at the front and two at the end which could signal if something happened at the protest and ensure that people could leave. First people got arrested and we had to continue to improve techniques. (...) We built shields, barricades that we had seen from internet, and we used fireworks ad diversion.” (Interview 5).

Informants highlighted that they took inspiration from other protests led by youth and students, such as the Milk Tea Alliance and especially from Hong Kong. Experiences from the 88-generation were also highlighted. One informant said: *“The way we do social movements focused on European struggles, underground, copying their methods. Apply in Burma context.”* (Interview 34). Another said:

“We started talking to activists and protesters from Hong Kong, but different experience as the police did not use real bullets. Myanmar military is using every mean necessary and it is very hard to plan for that even with having a plan A, B and C. (...) Non-violent movement at that time, improvising techniques, sound bombs, tear gas, trying to run from gun fire, had to make safe escape routes. Contact with both Hong Kong and Milk tea Alliance. History 1952, 1962, 2015, been through it before, a lot of reading and hearing

from former student leaders like 88-generation, inspiration, modify to today's situation. But had a very short time to adapt, was hard. Arrests, legal aid, try to monitor and trace down those that were arrested.” (Interview 5).

A third said:

“The protests became more and more dangerous, after maybe three months we became more well organized with defense and medical teams, but violence increased. (...) We had connection with Milk Tea Alliance and activists from Thailand to get help and advice” (Informant 18).

A fourth emphasized learning also from contemporary struggles in Ukraine and Syria:

“Strategies, we learn what to do in the frontline. A lot of inspiration from Hong Kong. Equipment, ways of using, we share scenarios, arguments. Straight to the rubber bullets, we need to reach that first and need to make sure the different arrangements are in place, and we know how to handle when the protests become more brutal. (...) We consider for the long-term helping each other, how to build shields, collective ideas, not very well designed, using whatever we have at our hand. Hong Kong, learn from the escalation there, how to make the brigades and blockades. We learn from the experiences of Ukraine, sure people protest could last as long as possible. Rubber bullets and more and more dangerous, using iron shields and plates to protect, wearing gas masks. Molotov cocktails we learn from Syria and Ukraine for defense, then it shifts to live ammunition, a lot of casualties, some sacrificing their lives, holding shields but headshots. We had to change the way and form of protests, cannot engage face-to-face with the live ammunition.” (Informant 43).

Chenoweth (2021) argues that one of the reasons why contemporary civil resistance movements may be less effective is because they increasingly embrace or tolerate fringes that become violent. In Hong Kong in 2019, protesters who used fringe violence say they were motivated to respond to police brutality although the protesters escalation was largely improvised (Chenoweth, 2021; Tung & Kasuya, 2021). Reactive use of violence such as fringe violence or violent acts of self-defense often occur in an improvised or spontaneous way (Anisin, 2020; Chenoweth, 2021). This was also evident in the movement in Myanmar. The fringe violence started out as a direct response to the

military's crackdown on peaceful protesters and when the means shifted to lethal weapons with live ammunition. As seen from the informants below, fringe violence occurred for instance through using slingshots or throwing Molotov cocktails.

Even with the deployment of defense groups the brutal repression continued. The use of fringe violence and acts of reactive violence in self-defense did not lead to any de-escalation of violence from the military. This shift of tactics possibly contributed to extending the time span of street protests as well as other forms of nonviolent methods applied but more and more protesters abandoned the streets as the personal risk became too high. Another strategic shift of methods in response to brutal repression occurred when what started as low-level protest violence was further developed into armed resistance or at least could be seen as a prerequisite.

6.4.2.3 Rise of armed resistance

Activists themselves often explain that they turned violent because of state repression which made nonviolent actions impossible (Chenoweth 2021). Other times, movements make an explicit decision to wage organized armed struggle.

Following brutal repression armed resistance emerged from the Spring Revolution (International Crisis Group, 2021; King, 2022; Loong, 2023; Ye Myo Hein, 2022b). The most dedicated youth driven by survivors' guilt, desperation, or search for new options to keep the struggle alive left the urban areas to seek help from EAOs and settled in liberated and rural areas (Loong, 2023; Mathieson, 2021a). This included Gen Z leaders and youth with background from student politics. Some said their motivation was purely to learn self-defense and how to defend against live ammunition whilst others were convinced that there was a need to abandon the strategy of nonviolence and take up arms. Some were inspired by the prior strategy from the 88-generation where armed resistance was also one of the chosen strategies to keep the movement alive, though not successful at that time. About the motivation to take up arms, one informant said: *"We did not want to kill, but get expertise on how to handle bullets, knowing where to hide, self-defense. Only want to protect.* (Interview 5). Another said: *"Survivor's guilt, we must involve in something, and some people do not have a choice. (...) We need to defend, we do not want to wage war, desperation, high-risk and not possible to be in the city and protest."* (Interview 34).

Some of these youth returned to fight as Urban Guerilla warfare groups (UG) in the biggest cities whilst others stayed behind to engage in traditional guerilla warfare in the form of People's

Defence Forces (PDFs) or Local Defence Forces (LDFs) (Frontier Myanmar, 2021i; ICG, 2021; Ye Myo Hein, 2022b). Some of the PDFs and LDFs are serving under NUG and their chain of command, whilst others are independent and operating autonomously (Frontier Myanmar, 2022b). One informant said: *“I needed to take a break when they started to use live ammunition. Started talking about going to the liberated area and talked to friends who had already gone there. (...) I participated in PDF”* (Interview 43). Due to confidentiality issues, informants were hesitant to speak in-detail about the activities and organization of the UG. One informant said: *“The UG was underground and kept a low profile”* (Interview 41). Another said:

“UG was very organic in the beginning. Many were arrested, made live videos, and many of them failed, did not have experiences, and EAOs do not have experience with urban warfare, still a very new technique. Many have been defeated or arrested, military already have a spy network in place and have trained for years. In urban areas life has more or less returned back to normal for most citizens and they do not want to risk their lives” (Interview 18).

Older generations still engaged in the movement, for instance by assisting and supporting youth. One informant said: *“PDFs were coming back (...) after the trainings, we shelter them for a while for a few months, help to arrange places for them to stay in my house, we need to relocate, getting more attention.”* (Interview 45). Another said:

“I helped youth escape and organized safe houses before they could flee to liberate areas and get training with armed groups. The military was targeting individuals. (...) Underground guerilla warfare groups became active, and I talked to youth leaders and had to move around a lot” (Interview 7).

The rise of armed resistance that emerged from the Spring Revolution again changed the status quo in Myanmar. Whilst facing brutal repression from the regime the movement succeeded in prolonging nonviolent activities through introducing low-level protest violence. Ultimately this sparked armed resistance and the formation of new armed actors which gave the military new adversaries to focus their attention on. I argue that the introduction of violent resistance should be seen as part of a combined strategy of the movement and will elaborate further on this in the section below.

6.4.2.4 Combined strategy

The combination of applying both violent and nonviolent tactics led to heated discussions within the movement. The introduction of armed resistance led to lower participation and to some extent a fragmentation of the movement. Many of those who participated in nonviolent actions opted out, whilst others are still involved in supporting roles and are carrying out low-scale nonviolent actions. Few are willing to risk their lives as part of the armed resistance. Interestingly the movement still has widespread support.

About their personal convictions about the use of violent or nonviolent means one informant said: *“Personal choice whether to engage with armed resistance or not. Many have lost everything.”* (Interview 1). Another said: *“Want people to join in peaceful ways, make sure that there is no violence. Youth are very hotheaded and older people are trying to calm down.”* (Interview 45). A third said: *“I strongly believe in non-violent struggle (...) cannot give life to armed struggle. (...) Still believe in revolution, not possible to go back to dark era.”* (Interview 9). A fourth said: *“Non-violence is the only way to end things peacefully.”* (Interview 12). A fifth said: *“We need nonviolent and armed resistance at the same time”* (Interview 24). A sixth said:

“People think in the early days of the coup that we could get democracy early. Pots and pans, smoke bombs to minimize risk, want to protest but the police crackdown in brutal way and we must defend ourselves. People got furious and angry with the casualties. (...) Doing armed resistance is the only way against brutal repression.” (Interview 35).

Even though people at a personal level disagree about the moral dimension of applying violent methods, there is still strong support for the movement even though it increasingly includes armed resistance. As one informant said: *“First we participate in nonviolent strikes, but today most is violent resistance, it is their own choice, without this practice we go back to the trap.”* (Interview 23). A second said:

“Shift nonviolent to violent. Change to brutality. We think that the UN will help us and intervene but then we understand that we must do something ourselves and we have to choose from our options. Joining PDF? (...) Tend to believe that everything will be over in a year or two. No help is coming from the international community. (...) Maybe we can learn from 88 gen but now it is up to the youth.” (Interview 35).

A third said:

“Did not expect that they [military] will kill brutally, did not expect the PDFs. Expect that peaceful protests will continue. (...) I respect PDFs, but it is a bit controversial, giving their life for freedom and I wish that we keep a peaceful way with means and get international support. A lot of controversy (...) now due to killings and violence with PDF, people are more insecure,” (Informant 27).

I argue that since the violent resistance developed in a reactive way responding to brutal repression from the military it is supported as part of the movement’s strategy. Full fragmentation of the movement has been hindered, especially due to NUG embracing the armed resistance as part of the movement’s strategy (Ye Myo Hein, 2022b). NUG has declared a people’s self-defensive war, established a Code of Conduct and a Chain of Command for the PDFs and LDFs willing to serve under NUG in alliance with EAOs (ICG, 2021; Irrawaddy, 2022a). This has contributed to strengthening organizational cohesion and have led to a mutually reinforced strategy being applied by the movement (Stokke & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2023). The experience of EAOs in armed resistance is an important factor explaining why the rise of new armed resistance has partially been successful and has contributed to keeping the movement alive (Loong, 2023; Mathieson, 2021a). Fostering inclusion and tighter alliances with the EAOs are crucial, as well as continuing to call for federal democracy (Irrawaddy, 2023c; Loong, 2023). The movement has continued to build on the collective identity unifying both ethnic minorities and the Burman majority group and has continued to advocate for collective claims including demands from both the ethnic resistance and pro-democracy struggle (Stokke & Nyi Nyi Kyaw, 2023; Vrieze, 2023).

As part of a broader strategy to challenge military rule in Myanmar, the civil resistance movement are involved in parallel state building made possible through securing territorial control through armed resistance and alliances with EAOs. NUG claim that they are the rightful and legitimate government of Myanmar and are leading a strategy of parallel state building through developing governmental institutions and providing essential basic services to the population (Htet Myet Min Tun & Moe Thuzar, 2022).

In the liberated areas controlled by either EAOs, PDFs or LDFs, many CDMers from health and education are serving as doctors and teachers in schools and hospitals. Several EAOs have engaged in parallel state building for decades with their own systems (Harrisson & Kyed, 2019; Jolliffe,

2015). One informant said there is a: *“Collaboration between CDM and EAOs to offer healthcare and education”* (Interview 6). Another said: *“NUG is controlling the liberated area and is a partially exile government”* (Interview 30). A third said: *“NUG is focusing on state building (...) but in the long run the focus is also on buying weapons. Fundraising is now declining.”* (Interview 27). A fourth said: *“A lot of elements needed to succeed for legitimacy and a functioning government. Need help from international community, political representation, and diplomatic help. We need weapons and resources.”* (Interview 1).

The parallel state building initiated by NUG as a strategic choice is seen as a viable alternative to and acts in opposition to the military regime who is no longer able to provide basic services to the population. One informant said: *“CDM teachers are still providing online offers for students. Advantage that MAL cannot control the internet and steer a new generation.”* (Interview 4). Another said:

“It is a dilemma for the military that they want to show that things were running like normal and want us to come back. (...) CDM already discussing education and health, hospitals in liberated areas. Main base for NUG to prove that they are the government. CDM is the main backer of the revolution. PDF is the main agitator. Need to show that we are still resisting. (...) People believe in the NUG government” (Informant 12).

A third said:

“NUG is very organized now compared to the early days, need to get support to crisis areas and coordinate with EAOs. NUG and Ministry of Health are also coordinating with EAOs. (...) Many want to work in the frontline, many hospitals are managed by CDM medical society members.” (Informant 15)

Doctors from CDM are also involved in the frontline of the armed struggle providing medical training such as first aid or operating clinics and hospitals, whilst teachers are contributing to provide education to Internally Displaced Persons (IDP). As one informant said: *“We sustain doctors and run combat medic training, schools for EAOs, around 7-8 months training”* (Interview 39).

Lessons and experiences from the past with a shadow exile government operating in the aftermath of the 1988 uprising might have contributed to spur the development and faith in parallel state

building (Lintner, 2023). A strategy for NUG which is different to the former exile government is to stay at least partially in-country to not contribute to fragmentation and engage heavily with building parallel government structures in opposition to military rule. An increase of competency and use of technology has enabled easier communication and better opportunities to carry out international advocacy and connect with diaspora networks.

I argue that the ability of the movement to carry out parallel state building is because of the combined strategy. The armed resistance has enabled NUG to gain territorial control and to challenge the military junta in new ways that differ from the past (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2022). NUG has embraced the armed struggle and has carried out work to develop chains of commands for PDFs to operate under the command of their Ministry of Defense (Ye Myo Hein, 2022b). NUG has also engaged with EAOs around the discussions on a federal army in Myanmar, though this has not been realized yet and is left pending due to the on-going war (Ye Myo Hein, 2023a). The variety of armed resistance actors including the UGs, PDFs, LDFs and EAOs also fits within the leaderful resistance as a strategic choice with multiple adversaries forcing the military to spread out its resources in trying to combat the movement.

The civil resistance movement in Myanmar has managed to survive despite brutal repression. Despite challenges the movement is still actively applying pressure on the military through a combined strategy of violent and nonviolent means. Even though fewer are participating actively in the movement, due to high-risk, the movement still enjoys the support of the broader population. If brutal repression from the military ceases or decreases, there might be a political opening to resume nonviolent methods such as mass demonstrations. For instance, the large-scale mobilization on the second year ‘anniversary’ since the coup on 1st February 2023 with a silent strike still showcased massive support from the people of Myanmar (Irrawaddy, 2023a).

6.5 Key findings

The findings I present have derived from a qualitative theory-guided case study analysis. The applied research design of this thesis enabled an analysis of the contemporary movement in Myanmar via theoretical contributions from social movement and civil resistance theories and data collected from fieldwork in Thailand. The analysis demonstrates that the factors explaining emergence of the movement are also relevant to understand endurance, in addition to the strategic choices of the movement. I deem the internal validity of my findings as strong and in terms of the external validity I deem that the findings are useful for studying revolutionary movements elsewhere.

These findings are significant as the contemporary case of civil resistance against a closed autocracy in Myanmar contradicts existing research and theory implying that such movements are short lived when met with brutal repression. Existing research suggests that collective action and social movements in high-risk authoritarian settings are less likely and that it is a rare phenomenon as they are increasingly being defeated or dissolved by brutal repression from authoritarian states.

I argue that the four factors below explain both 1) why civil resistance in Myanmar emerged following the 2021 coup and 2) why the civil resistance has been long-lived despite brutal repression from the military regime.

- A) Successful formation and transformation of a strong collective identity across social, ethnic, economic, and political societal divisions. This collective identity was built on grievances triggered by the coup as a moral shock and critical event. It enabled collective claim-making and expansion of the movement's mobilization base.
- B) Application of nonviolent methods from the onset. This nonviolent approach was crucial for overcoming collective action problems and for the successful development of a mass movement opposing military rule and providing legitimacy to new political stakeholders as a credible alternative for Myanmar's political future.
- C) Embracement of a leaderful civil resistance. This multilayered character of the movement was built on mobilization bases and enabled an expansion of political space through the

creation of new political stakeholders challenging protracted military rule in Myanmar.

- D) Ability of the civil resistance movement to continuously adapt, shift and develop their strategies. The movement's strategic repertoire was broadened in tandem and interaction with brutal repression from the military regime, ultimately applying a combined strategy of both violent and nonviolent means.

7.0 Implications of the Spring Revolution

In this chapter I will discuss theoretical implications of the findings of this thesis, comparative lessons for contemporary movements resisting autocratization and authoritarian rule elsewhere and reflect upon possible future scenarios for the Spring Revolution in Myanmar.

7.1 Theoretical Implications

This thesis contributes to a current knowledge gap about actors resisting closed autocracies and their strategies and capacities. The findings provided in this thesis can help nuance and advance theory.

First related to how we study civil resistance in contemporary revolutionary movements. I have contributed with a definition of civil resistance which includes the use of reactive violent means when movements are faced with brutal repression (see p. 28). I argue that it is important to better acknowledge that violent resistance occurs reactively and in self-defense, not only in the form of low-level protest violence, but also through armed resistance. The case of Myanmar illustrates that movements should not be viewed within a violence-nonviolence dichotomy as most movements apply both types of strategies, either simultaneously or at different times during their struggle. To not blur tactical choices of contemporary revolutionary movements we should not exclude them through strictly defining them within a violence vs. nonviolence dichotomy (Beck et al., 2022).

Second, a combined and mutually reinforcing strategy of violent and nonviolent means is useful to explain why movements endure whilst faced with brutal repression. In addition to how the movement continuously adapted and shifted strategies in tandem and interaction with the military regime. Application of such combined strategies could also become more common as part of revolutionary movement's repertoire and tactical choices. In the case of Myanmar, a combined strategy developed in response to brutal repression from the military regime and was effective for the survival of the Spring Revolution. Interestingly, armed resistance got accepted as a vital part of the movement's strategy, both by political stakeholders such as NUG and by the larger movement who predominantly supported nonviolent means from the onset, I argue that this was the case because of how the violent resistance emerged reactively from the Spring Revolution and is perceived as self-defense against brutal repression. The application of armed resistance was vital to apply more pressure on the military regime and led to closer alliances with EAOs uniting against

a common enemy (Hmung, 2021; Irrawaddy, 2023c; Loong, 2023; Mathieson, 2021a). Thus, forcing the military regime in Myanmar to fight adversaries on multiple fronts. The military has already lost some territorial control to the movement (Irrawaddy, 2022b; Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2022). The successful seizure of territorial control through armed resistance enabled the movement to employ the nonviolent method of parallel state building. The movement is still successful in being a viable alternative to military rule with continued support and legitimacy from the people of Myanmar.

Third, the phenomena of leaderful resistance in movements could be applied to better capture effective and sustainable leadership models with multiple leaders built from mobilization bases. I argue that this helps to nuance and advance the term leaderless resistance which has been used to describe contemporary movements without a single charismatic leader (Chenoweth, 2021). The case of Myanmar showcases how leaderless resistance was first embraced and developed into a leaderful resistance by institutionalizing the movement with multiple leaders acting in different ways and in various roles to sustain the movement and oppose the regime. The leaderful resistance was built on mobilization bases such as existing social, ethnic, and political networks and organizations, and contributed to organizational cohesion in the movement. This strategy of multiple leaders also enabled new political stakeholders to emerge and expand the political space in a closed autocracy.

Lastly, this thesis helps to strengthen the message that movements should not be viewed within a success-failure dichotomy (Beck et al., 2022). The movement in Myanmar is long-lived in its ability to apply constant pressure on the military regime. It is not possible to judge the outcome of the movement in a dichotomous way in terms of success or failure. The movement has already achieved significant political outcomes and is actively playing a vital role in shaping the future of Myanmar as part of contentious politics and an open-ended process.

Other possible explanations to explain the emergence and durability of the civil resistance in Myanmar could include analyzing the role of social media and the use of technology to a larger degree than what has been possible due to the scope of this thesis. Furthermore, to go in-depth in better understanding the role and strategies employed by the political stakeholders such as CRPH, NUG and NUCC, and the current and pre-existing role of EAOs and ethnic resistance in Myanmar, which was excluded from this thesis. The role of the international community has also been

excluded from analysis and could have provided additional and useful insight. This thesis has focused its scope on the internal actors and first movers of the Spring Revolution and thus followed their development of strategies and capacities.

7.2 Comparative Lessons

Many contemporary movements have been triggered by coups as critical events and moral shocks. For instance, in Sudan or Egypt (Beck et al., 2022; Goodwin, 2011). Many movements can show to new and existing grievances forming collective identities across social, political, and economic divides like what happened in Myanmar. For instance, as seen recently in Sri Lanka (Pushparajah & Balamayuran, 2022). It may be the case that formation of such collective identities plays a larger role in non-homogenous countries. The collective identity that formed in Myanmar after the 2021 coup represented something new and was not present in previous uprisings such as in 1988 or 2007. It played a role for both the significance and endurance of the movement especially through enabling wider participation from the existing mobilization base in Myanmar, and it is remarkable how much stronger the ties are across ethnic divides than before, though the collective identity may not be as strong indefinitely.

The case of Myanmar fits well into the on-going trend of revolutionary movements applying nonviolent resistance as a leading strategy for change and useful for overcoming collective action problems (Chenoweth, 2021). In contradiction to most nonviolent civil resistance movements being smaller in size these days the Spring Revolution in Myanmar quickly emerged as a nationwide and large-scale movement, similar to the mass mobilization we have witnessed in for instance Venezuela or Lebanon (Chenoweth, 2021). Rather than rely only on street protests the movement in Myanmar were able to adapt to other nonviolent methods such as civil disobedience acts, general strikes, and a myriad of other creative tactics to put pressure on the regime. This was enabled both by drawing on past experiences of prior movements and through copying and adapting tactics from contemporary movements elsewhere. Avoiding dependency on social media and technology was also avoided through the mobilization of existing networks and organizations. Many movements can show to past legacies of resistance and existing mobilization bases like in Myanmar, for instance in Palestine or Ukraine (Chenoweth, 2021; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Dahl, 2013; Pearlman, 2018).

Why and how movements emerge in high-risk authoritarian settings is not necessarily unique to the case of Myanmar.

Leaderless resistance appears to be quite a common strategy for contemporary movements. Where other movements have failed without having a unifying leader, thus leading movements to fragment or disperse especially when faced with brutal repression, the movement in Myanmar further developed the strategy into a leaderful resistance, somewhat similar to the movement in Hong Kong (CIVICUS, 2019; Hui, 2019). The Spring Revolution developed into an institutionalized movement with multiple leaders acting in different ways and in various roles to sustain the movement and oppose the regime. As seen in Myanmar the leaderful resistance strategy might be tactical to employ as it is harder for autocratic leaders to crackdown on multiple targets at once, or to sufficiently target individuals if they do not know who the leaders are. Being part of the multiple leaders, the formation of new political stakeholders also showcased how the Spring Revolution succeeded to expand political space in a closed autocracy.

Many contemporary movements have illustrated that they can be flexible and adapt when faced with brutal state repression, like seen in Egypt and Sudan (Beck et al., 2022; Chenoweth, 2021). The ability of movements to continuously find new ways to challenge the regime whilst being faced with repression is decisive for endurance. Avoiding path dependency in terms of prior resistance and maintaining the ability to learn from other movements and thus not making themselves prone for an easy defeat by the military is crucial. The element of unpredictability in Myanmar likely made it harder for the military to foresee the movement's next step.

Many movements die or fragment when violence is introduced (Chenoweth, 2021; Davenport, 2015). This relates to the occurrence of low-level protest violence such as fringe violence or acts of self-defense or if movements develop into armed groups. The case of Myanmar showcased how the use of reactive violence in response to brutal repression did not cause any serious fragmentation. When parts of the movement transformed into armed groups it was accepted by the larger movement and by many of the multiple leaders including political stakeholders. The introduction and support of armed resistance also enabled other nonviolent strategies, such as parallel state building, which further sustained the movement.

In sum, there are several lessons that could be learnt from the case of Myanmar, especially related to securing endurance and survival of movements in high-risk settings such as closed autocracies.

I deem the application of a leaderful resistance as particularly useful for other movements to sustain movements and expand political space. The application of a combined strategy including both violence and nonviolence could also be essential to prolong and sustain other movements, if the introduction of violent resistance is reactive in response to brutal repression and supported by the larger movement. Contemporary movements increasingly show that they do learn from each other and are active in copying and mimicking each other's strategies and tactical choices.

7.3 Possible Future Scenarios

It is impossible to determine the outcome for Myanmar's political future as well as for the movement at this stage. Most likely it will be determined by contentious politics between the main forces, meaning the political and armed struggles between the military and the ethnic resistance and pro-democracy opposition. In addition, geopolitics and international politics could play a significant role. The current situation is heavily marked by continued armed struggle. Possible future scenarios could include the military succeeding, the revolutionary movement succeeding, or a protracted civil war with multiple political and security orders that could even result in a fragmentation of Myanmar, but it is too early to say what will happen. Based on the interviews conducted and the informants' assessment of the current political situation I will offer reflections on possible future scenarios.

The civil resistance movement is today operating on multiple fronts both from outside and from within the country (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2022). Over two years have passed since the military coup and the resistance is on-going and demonstrating that the military has not succeeded in taking control as the people of Myanmar are still resisting autocracy. The revolutionary movement is operating very differently from the early days following the 2021 coup, with individuals now involved in a multifold of ways and most embracing a combined strategy including both violent and nonviolent means. The political stakeholders, CRPH, NUG and NUCC, have further rooted their legitimacy and existence in parallel and opposition to the military, and are representing a credible alternative to military rule in Myanmar (Special Advisory Council for Myanmar, 2022).

Alarmingly the combination of economic collapse, COVID-19 pandemic and the 2021 coup have reversed a decade of positive socio-economic development in Myanmar and instead created a

severe and multifaceted humanitarian crisis (Relief Web, 2023). The situation has deteriorated drastically since the 2021 coup. An economic crisis was provoked by the military's mismanagement of the economy and resulted in a doubling of poverty rates compared to March 2020. Approximately 40 per cent of the population is now estimated to be living below the national poverty line (Relief Web, 2023). Many have been forced to flee from conflict zones, especially as the military fails to distinguish between military targets and non-combatant civilians. The risk of starvation has been reported by rural populations as the military has continued to impose restrictions on access to areas affected by conflict and violence. Humanitarian actors have been prevented from reaching 17.6 million people in need (Relief Web, 2023)

The continued state repression and targeting of political opposition in Myanmar have led many citizens to stop their involvement in the movement and try to cope with increased living costs. Nevertheless, many people continue to engage in the resistance movement both through violent and nonviolent means. For instance, demonstrations of nonviolent actions are still organized by small groups of individuals such as through flash mobs or silent strikes. Notably on the 1st Feb 2023 marking two years since the military coup a nation-wide silent strike was initiated where people stayed at home and the streets were deserted in a symbolic gesture to still showcase the people's resistance to military rule (Irrawaddy, 2023a). Many CDMers engage in supporting the parallel state building under NUG, EAOs, LDFs and PDFs. Many are involved in fundraising activities for the movement, including diaspora groups spread around the globe (Abuza, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2022). Armed clashes occur frequently between PDFs; LDFs, EAGs and the military, as well as brutal attacks from the military including bombing civilians and burning villages (OHCHR, 2023).

Many informants highlighted continued warfare as the most likely future scenario. Until now the PDFs have mostly been involved in defensive warfare that has denied the military territorial control of large parts of the country, and NUG has announced that 2023 will be a peak year moving on to offensive warfare (Irrawaddy, 2022a). Lack of resources, mainly weapons and human resources, is a key challenge and several stressed the importance of international support like weapon donations to Ukraine. There is still a huge power asymmetry between the warfare capabilities of the movement and the military, which raises doubts about the possibility of any quick victory for the movement (Ye Myo Hein, 2023a). The role of EAOs is crucial, as they are

the most experienced with direct combat with the military and there should be increased focus on strengthening relations and collaboration between NUG and the various EAOs (Loong, 2023; Mathieson, 2021b; Ong, 2021; Ye Myo Hein, 2023a).

There are also talks about a potential opportunity for negotiations with the military regime, though this seems unlikely given the on-going civil war. In addition to lack of a unified response amongst actors within the movement and the military preferring endless war to negotiations (Sun, 2023; Ye Myo Hein, 2023b). Some informants said that negotiations or political dialogue might be an option if ASSK and other NLD leaders are released. Others clearly rejected negotiations overall.

The political survival of the civil resistance movement is dependent on avoiding fragmentation. This means that strengthening the military and political unity is a continuous process of key importance. Discussions are still unfolding about the more detailed content on what federalism entails. Many think that the detailed discussions should wait until the armed conflict with the military is over. One of the key challenges is getting more EAOs on board and for NUG to ensure an inclusive discussion on power sharing with all relevant stakeholders (Ong, 2021; Ye Myo Hein, 2023a). Disagreements about federal democracy could lead to damaging cracks in the collective unity if there is a failure to alleviate the lack of trust between different actors, either distrust between NUG or NLD and the EAOs, or more generally between the Burman majority population and the ethnic minority groups (David et al., 2022; Loong, 2021; Vrieze, 2023). Ultimately this could lead to a weakening or fragmentation of the movement despite the unprecedented unity of diverse actors that has been identified in this thesis.

The junta is combining military repression with additional strategies that aim to weaken the opposition and legitimize military rule (Ye Myo Hein, 2023b). The military has for example announced that they want to conduct elections (International Crisis Group, 2023a, 2023c). The decision to hold elections was initially scheduled for 2023, but most indications lean towards a postponement. The martial law installed by the military was extended on the second anniversary of the coup (Irrawaddy, 2023b). According to informants the elections are referred to as ‘sham-elections’ and seen as a tactic from the military to re-gain legitimacy from the international community. Many think that the military will go ahead with the elections no matter what. The international community has mostly condemned these attempts to hold elections unless they can guarantee free and fair elections, a scenario which does not seem likely given all the insurgencies

and human rights atrocities currently taking place. The military has nevertheless started with a controversial voter registration and has banned or dissolved most oppositional political parties (ICG, 2023a). The strategy of the movement has thus far been to reject the elections and share the narrative that the military will try to cheat or effectively hinder any serious opposition to take part (Irrawaddy, 2023d). Campaigns have been initiated to urge citizens not to register for voting and not give legitimacy to the military by casting votes in the near-future election. It is not likely that NUG will run with a party and many other significant oppositional parties have already stated that they will not participate (ICG, 2023c). NLD was officially dissolved by the military in March 2023 and cannot run (Agence France-Presse, 2023). As part of speculations, some informants thought the movement might bomb polling stations and through violent means ensure that the election cannot be held.

To sum up, this chapter has offered some reflections on possible future scenarios both for Myanmar's political future and for the Spring Revolution. It is impossible to say yet what will happen, except that the outcome will likely continue to be determined by contentious politics and that we should continue to view the revolutionary movement as part of an open-ended process.

8.0 Conclusion

Before the poet Khet Thi was killed (see p. 1) he wrote that he was a poet, a guitar player, and a cake baker, and not someone who would fire a gun against the military regime. In his final poem he wrote: “My people are being shot and I can only throw back poems. But when you are sure your voice is not enough, then you need to choose a gun carefully. I will shoot”, implying that his attitude was changing (Guardian, 2021).

Over two years have passed since the 2021 military coup and the civil resistance movement in Myanmar is still active as a viable alternative and an opposition hindering the military from gaining control over population and territory. This contradicts existing research and theories on actors that resist closed autocracies as the civil resistance movement in Myanmar would be expected to be short lived when faced with brutal repression.

In thesis I have addressed this analytical puzzle through the following research questions:

- 1) *What enabled the civil resistance movement in Myanmar to emerge after the 2021 coup?*
- 2) *Why is the civil resistance movement in Myanmar after the 2021 coup long lived despite brutal repression from the military regime?*

Through a qualitative theory-guided case-study analysis based on data collection from fieldwork in Thailand and theoretical contributions drawing on both civil resistance and social movement studies I argue that the civil resistance movement in Myanmar both emerged after the 2021 military coup and is long-lived despite brutal repression from the military regime because of the following four factors, here presented in a shortened version: A) Successful formation and transformation of a strong collective identity, B) Application of nonviolent methods from the onset to effectively overcome collective action problems, C) Embracement of a leaderful resistance, and D) Ability to continuously adapt, shift and develop strategies in response to brutal repression from the military regime, ultimately applying a combined strategy of both violent and nonviolent means.

This thesis contributes filling a gap in the literature on actors resisting autocratization and authoritarian rule. The findings are not only relevant to better understand the contemporary case

of Myanmar but also useful for further research of contemporary movements elsewhere, and especially those operating in high-risk settings such as in closed autocracies.

“Until The End of the World” is known as the anthem of the Spring Revolution. It is a famous protest song in Myanmar originally written and recorded during the 88-uprising for the unknown heroes who gave their lives fighting for democracy (MacLachlan, 2023; Pinky Htut Aung, 2021). In the song, words that were banned during the military junta’s regime such as “democracy” and “revolution” are heard (MacLachlan, 2023). The song was embraced by the Spring Revolution and is still in use by the movement. It is another testimony of how people in Myanmar are still resisting a protracted military rule and are doing so by both drawing on past legacies of civil resistance and introducing new tactics which this thesis has demonstrated can help both nuance and advance theory.

This thesis helps to nuance and advance theory especially related to how we study civil resistance where reactive violent resistance could play a more prominent part of revolutionary movement’s repertoire and tactical choices. Combined strategies of applying both violent and nonviolent means could prolong movements when faced with brutal repression. This thesis may also have indicated a possibly larger trend of leaderful resistance helpful to sustain movements and expand political space in high-risk authoritarian settings.

The case of Myanmar can help to better understand how armed resistance could be seen as part revolutionary movements’ reactive response to brutal repression and work in combination with nonviolent methods of civil resistance. Furthermore, how we should not be too quick in deeming the success or failure of such movements. As revolutions are always unfinished, we should view them as open-ended processes as part of contentious politics, and we still do not know the outcome of the political struggle in Myanmar.

There is a need for further research to dive deeper into and explain conditions necessary for civil resistance movements to be sustained in contexts where these do not necessarily thrive or survive in closed autocracies. Especially in a time where autocracies are on the rise and people and movements continue to challenge their legitimacy and power claims. Equipping ourselves with more knowledge about when and how movements rise and are effective in high-risk authoritarian settings is essential to successfully challenge and eventually overthrow autocratic leaders.

There is still a gap in better understanding the strategies and capacities of movements that operate in closed autocracies. The case of civil resistance in Myanmar after the 2021 military coup offers useful insight but the analytical challenge of identifying under which circumstances movements struggling against closed autocracies are durable and effective remains to be fully solved.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Informant List

List of informants:

Interview number	Date	Informant category	Notes
1	24.12.2022	Student and Gen Z	In Burmese
2	24.12.2022	Student and Gen Z	In English
3	25.12.2022	Students and Gen Z	Group interview with two informants. In Burmese.
4	25.12.2022	CDM Education	In English
5	26.12.2022	Student and ex-PDF member	In Burmese
6	26.12.2022	Ethnic minority and CSO	In English
7	27.12.2022	CDM and NUG	In Burmese
8	27.12.2022	Ethnic minority and CSO	In English. Virtual interview.
9	27.12.2022	Student	In English.
10	28.12.2022	Ethnic minority and CSO	In English. Virtual interview.
11	28.12.2022	Gen Z	In Burmese.
12	28.12.2022	CDM Health	In English.
13	29.12.2022	CDM	In English
14	02.01.2023	CDM Education	In English.
15	02.01.2023	CDM Health	In Burmese.
16	03.01.2023	CDM Police	In Burmese.
17	03.01.2023	Student and Gen Z	In English.
18	04.01.2023	Ethnic minority and CSO	In English. Virtual interview.

19	04.01.2023	CDM	In Burmese.
20	05.01.2023	Ethnic minority and CSO.	In English. Virtual interview.
21	05.01.2023	Journalist.	In Burmese.
22	05.01.2023	CDM soldier.	In Burmese.
23	08.01.2023	CDM artist.	In Burmese.
24	08.01.2023	CDM civil servant CDM Health Student	Group interview with three informants. In Burmese.
25	08.01.2023	Journalist.	In English and Burmese.
26	09.01.2023	CDM Health.	In English.
27	10.01.2023	CDM Education and CSO.	In English.
28	10.01.2023	Student	In English.
29	11.01.2023	Ethnic minority and CSO.	In English.
30	13.01.2023	Journalist and ethnic minority.	In English.
31	14.01.2023	CDM	In English. Virtual interview.
32	15.01.2023	CDM and Trade Union	In English.
33	16.01.2023	CDM Health	In English.
34	16.01.2023	Student	In English. Virtual interview.
35	16.01.2023	Students and Gen Z	Group interview with two informants. In Burmese.
36	16.01.2023	CDM Education.	In English.
37	17.01.2023	CDM Education.	In Burmese.
38	17.01.2023	88-generation	In English.
39	17.01.2023	CDM Health.	In English.
40	18.01.2023	Journalist.	In Burmese.

41	18.01.2023 and 19.01.2023	CDM and Trade Union members	Group interview with five informants. In Burmese.
42	19.01.2023	CDM Education	In Burmese.
43	19.01.2023	Student and PDF member	In English and Burmese.
44	20.01.2023	CRPH member	In English and Burmese.
45	20.01.2023	CDM	In Burmese.
46	26.01.2023	Student, Ethnic Minority and CSO	In English.

Appendix B: Thematic Codebook

Initial Thematic Codebook

I used NVivo to process the extracted data. I systematically organized the transcribed data by coding it into themes which then enabled me to start identifying patterns and relationships. The themes were either pre-determined in the sense that they were drawn directly from my interview guide or themes that emerged directly from the data. The thematic coding made it possible to make sense of the retrieved collected text from the interviews and enabled me to analyze and find meaning emerging from the collected data.

<i>Code</i>	<i>Description</i>
Actors	
- CRPH	The role and emergence of CRPH
- EAO	The role of EAOs
- Military	The military junta and their role pre- and post- 2021 coup
- NLD	Informants talking about the role of NLD
- NUG	The role and emergence of NUG.
CDM	The role of CDM from its emergence until today.
- Education	Education sector in CDM
- Health	Health sector in CDM
Coup	Thoughts, feelings and first reactions after the 2021 coup. Why the coup happened?
- Motivation	How informants responded to the coup. Motivation to react.
Future scenarios	Future scenarios for the movement to stay longlived
- Armed Resistance	Armed resistance as possible scenario, both defensive and offensive warfare.
- Election	Elections as possible future scenario
- Federal Democracy	Federal democracy as possible future scenario
Gen Z	The role of Gen Z in the Spring Revolution.
Leaderless	Lack of leaders. Thoughts and reactions. Strategy?

Movement	The civil resistance movement in Myanmar after the 2021 coup, including all relevant stakeholders.
Nonviolence	The use of nonviolent methods and moral conviction about applying nonviolent tactics
- Flashmobs	Flashmobs and other creative non-violent methods in the movement
- Online	Use of social media and technology in the movement
- Street Protests	Use of street protests
Participation	Participation in the movement. Individual or collective level.
- CSO	CSO background
- Ethnic	Ethnic background
- Student	Student background
Previous involvement	Prior involvement in past mobilization in Myanmar
- 2015	Knowledge of or participated in the 2015 student march
- 2007	Knowledge of, inspired by or participated in the 2007 Saffron Revolution
- 1988	Knowledge of, inspired by or participated in the 88-uprising in 1988
Repression	State repression from the military junta.
Spring Revolution	The role of the Spring Revolution in 2021 until today
Strategies	Different strategies applied by the movement. Tactical choices. Response to repression.
Violence	The use of violent resistance methods and moral conviction about applying violent tactics
- Fringe Violence	Use of fringe violence and low-level protest violence including in self-defense during street protests
- PDF	Emergence of and role of People's Defence Force, traditional warfare led by Gen Z youth
- UG	Emergence of and role of Urban Guerilla warfare led by Gen Z youth

Appendix C: Interview Guide

Interview Guide: “Civil Resistance against Autocracies and the Spring Revolution in Myanmar”

Introduction and the purpose of my thesis:

- My background, my interest for Burma/Myanmar and previous work, currently pursuing a master degree at University of Oslo in Peace and Conflict Studies.
- The purpose of my research and why I’m conducting fieldwork:
 - Explore civil resistance against the military regime in Myanmar – I wish to better understand how it operates, what is its role (since Feb 1 until today) and how may it differ from other cases of civil resistance against autocratic rule.
 - I am particularly interested in knowing more about the civil resistance movements strategies.
 - The research question that I want to answer is: why is civil resistance against the military regime in Myanmar long-lived despite brutal repression?

Overall idea for how the interview will be carried out

- Introduction.
- I will ask some questions about yourself and involvement in the movement, then questions about the movement, different actors, strategies and what you think will happen in the future.
- If there is anything else you would like to raise, there will be some time in the end.

Before we start the interview

- Participation in the project is voluntary, if you choose to participate you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason.
- All information about you will be made anonymous, no personal data will be used in publications

- Ask for consent (to participate in interview, for the interview to be audio recorded digitally).

Motivation	Question	Notes
Background information about the informant	Could you please provide a short presentation of yourself, your background as part of the civil resistance movement.	
Personal involvement in the civil resistance movement in Myanmar	Why did you join? (personal risk) (At what time did you decide to join the civil resistance movement, any previous experience?)	
Overall assessment of the civil resistance movement and the political situation in Myanmar The role of civil resistance since the coup and why/how it emerged.	Could you share your thoughts about the civil resistance movement in Myanmar since the coup. Why do you think it emerged? In your opinion, what is the role of the civil resistance movement today? (What makes it different/similar to past movements? What has changed?)	
Mapping actors The role of violent vs. non-violent civil resistance	In your opinion, who are the most important actors (individuals/organizations) within the civil resistance movement?	

<p>How different actors relate to each other</p>	<p>The role of CDM? The role of NUG, CRPH, PDFs etc.</p> <p>How do the different actors work together? Who is most important? What are their different roles?</p> <p>More blurred lines between violent and non-violent resistance today than in the early days of the coup.</p> <p>Is the civil resistance movement in Myanmar largely peaceful and non-violent today? Any challenges?</p>	
<p>Strategies and capacities of the movement (robustness)</p> <p>How does the movement organize itself, which tools and strategies are they applying, and how may it have changed over time.</p>	<p>How does the civil resistance movement organize itself?</p> <p>What type of resources do you have available? (what is needed?)</p> <p>Which tools do you use? (examples, demonstrations, sit-ins, boycotts etc)</p> <p>How has the work of the civil resistance movement changed over time? (since the coup until today) / is anything different from the way the movement operates today compared to the early days of the coup?</p>	

	<p>How are you able to deal with brutal repression from the military government?</p>	
<p>Future scenarios (long-lived)</p>	<p>Do you think the civil resistance movement exists in 5 years time?</p> <p>What do you think will happen in the future?</p> <p>(In your opinion, what needs to happen for the civil resistance movement to succeed?)</p>	
<p>Wrapping up and what will happen next</p> <p>+ possible snowballing</p>	<p>Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. Very appreciated. Is it okay if I reach out to you later if I have any further questions?</p> <p>If everything goes according to plan, I will hand in my thesis end of May.</p> <p>Do you have any contacts who I could possibly contact and ask for an interview?</p>	

Appendix D: Consent Form and Information Letter

Are you interested in taking part in the research project: “*Civil Resistance against Autocracies and the Spring Revolution in Myanmar*”?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project for a master’s thesis where the main purpose is to explore how civil resistance against the military regime in Myanmar operates and how it may differ from other cases of non-violent resistance against autocratic rule.

In this letter I provide information about the purpose of the research project and what participation in the project will involve.

Purpose of the project

The purpose of the project is to explore how civil resistance against the military regime in Myanmar operates, what is its role and how does it differ from other cases of non-violent resistance against autocratic rule. Moreover, to investigate the civil resistance movement’s strategies and capacities against the military’s claim to authority and legitimacy. Through the research project for my master’s thesis, I will attempt to provide explanations for why the civil resistance in Myanmar is so robust and long-lived compared to other cases of civil resistance in other countries in the aftermath of coups and/or elections.

The research question I aim to answer are:

- *Why is civil resistance against the military regime in Myanmar long-lived despite brutal repression?*

Due to the scope of the master’s thesis, I will focus on non-violent civil resistance and thus not include violent resistance such as the newly established People’s Defence Forces (PDF) or armed resistance from Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) in Myanmar.

Which institution is responsible for the research project?

The Department of Political Science at the University of Oslo is the institution responsible for the research project.

Why are you being asked to participate?

I am asking you to participate in this research project either based on knowledge regarding your involvement in the civil resistance movement in Myanmar or because someone has referred me to talk with you [*this text will be adjusted to each informant individually depending on how I have made a connection to the potential informant*].

What does participation involve for you?

If you choose to take part in the research project it will involve being available for a semi-structured (informal) interview lasting about 30 – 60 minutes. The interview will be organized as a conversation around your reflections and participation in the civil resistance movement in Myanmar and how you understand its role and the strategies of the movement. During the

conversation it is also likely that we will touch upon political issues in Myanmar and how you assess the current situation and the role of civil resistance.

Depending on the situation and whether you are comfortable or not, I will ask for your consent for the conversation to be recorded. I will anyways take notes during our conversation.

If any children (under the age of 18 years old) want to participate I will provide information in order for parents or guardians to provide consent for participation in the project.

If it is not possible to conduct the interview in English, I will include a local trustworthy interpreter to accompany me. The interpreter will not have access to any stored data after the interview and will also be bound by confidentiality and to ensure anonymity of personal information accessed through the interviews.

Participation is voluntary

Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

I will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified here. I will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the GDPR).

It is only I, Beathe Øgård, as project leader, who will have access to the personal data collected. All personal data will be anonymized. I will replace your name, age, location/address with codes. The list of informants to the project including names, contact details and codes will be stored in encrypted files and separately from other collected data. The personal data will also be stored in the University of Oslo's data storage hotel, which is protected through a two-step verification process for additional security.

Your personal information will not under any circumstances be used in publications, and you will not be recognizable in any of the publications from this project.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

The planned end date of the project is 30.06.2023. All audio recordings will be deleted at the end of the project. Personal data will be deleted when the project ends.

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?

We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with the University of Oslo, Data Protection Services has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project meets requirements in data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?

If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

- Project leader: Beathe Øgård, MA student at Department of Political Science, University of Oslo via beatheo@student.sv.uio.no or SMS/WhatsApp/Signal +47 950 31 719.
- Supervisor for the project leader, Professor Kristian Stokke, Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo, Kristian.stokke@sosgeo.uio.no

If you have questions about how data protection has been assessed in this project, contact:

Data Protection Services, by email: (personverntjenester@sikt.no) or by telephone: +47 53 21 15 00.

Yours sincerely,

Beathe Øgård

Project Leader

(Researcher/MA Student)

Kristian Stokke

Supervisor

Consent form

Consent can be given in writing (including electronically) or orally. If you prefer to give consent orally, we will go through this form at the start of our first conversation.

I have received and understood information about the project “Civil Resistance against Autocracies and the Spring Revolution in Myanmar” and have been given the opportunity to ask questions. I give consent:

- to participate in an interview
- to the interview being audio recorded digitally

I give consent for my personal data to be processed until the end of the project (30.06.2023).

(Signed by participant, date)

Appendix E: Sikt Approval letter

The research project has been approved by Sikt - Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research. The processing of personal data has been handled in accordance with the requirements in data protection legislation and guidelines from Sikt.

Vurdering

Referansenummer	Type	Dato
102660	Standard	07.11.2022

Prosjekttittel

Civil Resistance against Autocracies and the Spring Revolution in Myanmar

Behandlingsansvarlig institusjon

Universitetet i Oslo / Det samfunnsvitenskapelige fakultet / Institutt for statsvitenskap

Prosjektansvarlig

Kristian Stokke

Student

Beathe Øgård

Prosjektperiode

15.08.2022 - 30.06.2023

Kategorier personopplysninger

Alminnelige

Særlige

Rettslig grunnlag

Samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a)

Uttrykkelig samtykke (Personvernforordningen art. 9 nr. 2 bokstav a)

Behandlingen av personopplysningene kan starte så fremt den gjennomføres som oppgitt i meldeskjemaet. Det rettslige grunnlaget gjelder til 30.06.2023.

[Meldeskjema](#)

Kommentar

OM VURDERINGEN

Personverntjenester har en avtale med institusjonen du forsker eller studerer ved. Denne avtalen innebærer at vi skal gi deg råd slik at behandlingen av personopplysninger i prosjektet ditt er lovlig etter personvernregelverket.

Personverntjenester har nå vurdert den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at behandlingen er lovlig, hvis den gjennomføres slik den er beskrevet i meldeskjemaet med dialog og vedlegg.

VIKTIG INFORMASJON TIL DEG

Du må lagre, sende og sikre dataene i tråd med retningslinjene til din institusjon. Dette betyr at du må bruke leverandører for spørreskjema, skylagring, videosamtale o.l. som institusjonen din har avtale med. Vi gir generelle råd rundt dette, men det er institusjonens egne retningslinjer for informasjonssikkerhet som gjelder.

VURDERING AV BEHOV FOR DPIA

Prosjektet behandler særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om en sårbar gruppe (individer som identifiserer seg som en del av mostandsbevegelsen i Myanmar), noe som kan utløse en plikt til å foreta personvernkonsekvensvurdering (DPIA).

Personverntjenester har vurdert at det ikke var behov for å gjøre en DPIA jf. personvernforordningen art. 35 nr. 1 for dette prosjektet. Dette var basert på en helhetsvurdering der følgende momenter ble vektlagt:

- De registrerte samtykker til bruk av sine personopplysninger
- De registrerte får god informasjon om behandlingen av personopplysningene og sine rettigheter
- Opplysningene samles og krypteres inn ved bruk av Nettskjema diktafon og sendes direkte til UiO sitt lagringshotell
- Få personer har tilgang til personopplysningene
- Behandlingen har kort varighet
- Det behandles få personopplysninger

TYPE OPPLYSNINGER OG VARIGHET

Prosjektet vil behandle alminnelige personopplysninger og særlige kategorier av personopplysninger om etnisk opprinnelse, religion, politisk oppfatning og fagforeningsmedlemskap frem til den datoen som er oppgitt i meldeskjemaet.

LOVLIG GRUNNLAG

Prosjektet vil innhente samtykke fra de registrerte til behandlingen av personopplysninger. Vår vurdering er at prosjektet legger opp til et samtykke i samsvar med kravene i art. 4 og 7, ved at det er en frivillig, spesifikk, informert og utvetydig bekreftelse som kan dokumenteres, og som den registrerte kan trekke tilbake.

Lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen vil dermed være den registrertes samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 bokstav a.

For særlige kategorier av personopplysninger vil lovlig grunnlag for behandlingen være den registrertes uttrykkelige samtykke, jf. personvernforordningen art. 6 nr. 1 a, art. 9 nr. 2 a, jf. personopplysningsloven § 10, jf. § 9 (2).

PERSONVERNPRINSIPPER

Personverntjenester vurderer at den planlagte behandlingen av personopplysninger vil følge prinsippene i personvernforordningen om:

- lovlighet, rettferdighet og åpenhet (art. 5.1 a), ved at de registrerte får tilfredsstillende informasjon om og samtykker til behandlingen
- formålsbegrensning (art. 5.1 b), ved at personopplysninger samles inn for spesifikke, uttrykkelig angitte og berettigede formål, og ikke behandles til nye, uforenlige formål
- dataminimering (art. 5.1 c), ved at det kun behandles opplysninger som er adekvate, relevante og nødvendige for formålet med prosjektet
- lagringsbegrensning (art. 5.1 e), ved at personopplysningene ikke lagres lengre enn nødvendig for å oppfylle formålet

DE REGISTRERTES RETTIGHETER

Så lenge de registrerte kan identifiseres i datamaterialet vil de ha følgende rettigheter: innsyn (art. 15), retting (art. 16), sletting (art. 17), begrensning (art. 18), og dataportabilitet (art. 20).

Personverntjenester vurderer at informasjonen om behandlingen som de registrerte vil motta oppfyller lovens krav til form og innhold, jf. art. 12.1 og art. 13.

Vi minner om at hvis en registrert tar kontakt om sine rettigheter, har behandlingsansvarlig institusjon plikt til å svare innen en måned.

FØLG DIN INSTITUSJONS RETNINGSLINJER

Personverntjenester legger til grunn at behandlingen oppfyller kravene i personvernforordningen om riktighet (art. 5.1 d), integritet og konfidensialitet (art. 5.1 f) og sikkerhet (art. 32).

Ved bruk av databehandler (spørreskjemaleverandør, skylagring eller videosamtale) må behandlingen oppfylle kravene til bruk av databehandler, jf. art 28 og 29. Bruk leverandører som din institusjon har avtale med.

For å forsikre dere om at kravene oppfylles, må dere følge interne retningslinjer og/eller rådføre dere med behandlingsansvarlig institusjon.

MELD VESENTLIGE ENDRINGER

Dersom det skjer vesentlige endringer i behandlingen av personopplysninger, kan det være nødvendig å melde dette til oss ved å oppdatere meldeskjemaet. Før du melder inn en endring, oppfordrer vi deg til å lese om hvilke type endringer det er nødvendig å melde: <https://www.nsd.no/personverntjenester/fylle-ut-meldeskjema-for-personopplysninger/melde-endringer-i-meldeskjema>

Du må vente på svar fra oss før endringen gjennomføres.

OPPFØLGING AV PROSJEKTET

Personverntjenester vil følge opp ved planlagt avslutning for å avklare om behandlingen av personopplysningene er avsluttet.

Lykke til med prosjektet!