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UNDERSTANDING THE EMERGENCE OF MYANMAR PARALLEL GOVERNMENT: FROM 2021 COUP TO CIVIL WAR

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Abstract

Since the Commander in Chief of the Myanmar Military, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing seized the power and expelled all elected lawmakers on February 1, 2021, the country has resulted in chaos. Consequently, the National Unity Government (NUG) was formed by most of the former elected NLD lawmakers, Aung San Suu Kyi party, to challenge the military regime. The objective of this research is to examine the mobilization of the NUG and its supporters. The research applies qualitative research methods and a documentary analysis approach. This study utilizes the theory of social media 'mobilization theory and reinforcement theory to examine the move of NUG and its supporters. The main research question is 'How do the NUG and its supporters struggle to gain power and utilize social media to achieve legitimacy after the 2021 military coup?' The NUG and its supporters' diffusing ideas, words, interact and discourse through social media to win the fight for legitimacy are effective and historic. However, political polarization in certain conflicts has diminished the credibility of the NUG and the efforts of its supporters. Five key findings include: changing public views via social media terminology; mobilizing diasporas and locals for

crowdfunding; organizing protests against State-Owned Enterprises; Myanmar's UN ambassador advocating for human rights; and removing military-linked social media accounts.

Keywords:

National Unity Government, Social Media, Mobilization Theory, Reinforcement Theory, 2021 Military Coup

1. Introduction

From mass and peaceful protests, Myanmar's transformation into a prolonged civil conflict is a tragedy. Myanmar is already one of the least developed economies and an isolated state in ASEAN state members, as the people have been under military rule for more than six decades. Liberal democracy was never a goal of the Myanmar military as it created its own term 'disciplined democracy' prior to the power transition to quasi-government in 2011. Democratic transition and economic reform from 2011 to 2020 had not progressed much due to Covid-19 pandemic. The military concluded that the loss of three by-elections during the transitional period and the victory of the Aung San Suu Kyi party in the 2020 election further threaten its core position. As a result, it made the decision to reverse the democratic transition. Without providing any evidence, it unilaterally claimed the victory of the Aung San Suu Kyi party in the 2020 general election as irregularities. On February 1, 2021, the team of elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi was deposed by the Myanmar military, also known as the Tatmadaw. Following that, the military detained Aung San Suu Kyi, her president, and other civilian cabinet members.

Social media were blocked by the military. At the beginning of the coup, the Junta attempted to act as normal, as depicted by the state-owned newspaper Global New Light of Myanmar, which portrayed revitalizing the tourism sector and addressing the Yangon Circular Train. On the other hand, the ordinary people, labor unions, activists and civil servants respond with mass protests everywhere. The military initially responds with lethal ammunition, tear gas, internet cuts, arrests, and stun grenades. Within a few days, mass protests increased and expanded across the entire country. The most violent day was recorded on March 27, 2021, which is also Myanmar's Armed Forces Day. 158 protesters were previously killed, who were shot in the head and chest, intended to be casualties.

According to Andra, there are two main axes of conflict that have been influencing Myanmar's political dynamic for 60 years (MongMao Andra, 2021). First, there is a power rivalry,

Burmese-intra conflict between Burmese major ethnic groups, namely the military, and Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD political party. Second, the application of rigid centralization and non-localization by the majority Burmese ethnic group on minority non-Burmese ethnic groups after post colonization. Sometimes, the military and the NLD are united against a minority ethnic group, which has led to prosecution, as analysts indicated in the case of the Rohingya ICJ ruling. The 2021 military coup conflict is believed to be caused by the first conflict axis (MongMao Andra, 2021).

The 2021 military coup has attracted significant attention from scholars, resulting in various academic papers that analyze the event from different perspectives. Comparatively, given the limited academic focus on the motives of the NUG regime, this research aims to examine its post-coup transformation from a democracy advocate to the formation of armed forces. The aim of this research is to examine the motives behind the major change in the political stance and strategy of the NUG administration to form armed forces in response to the military. The principles objectives of the study were as follows.

1. To understand how the NUG and its supporters construct their political goals and political activities through social media
2. To understand the NUG regime's challenges and current trend

This study includes selected sections: Introduction, literature review, discussion, key summary of findings, and recommendations. Sources are extracted from the original thesis.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Social Media and Political Activism

It is undeniable that new media technologies have facilitated demonstrators in mobilizing and coordinating political activities. The role of digital media in political participation, both offline demonstrations and participation as leaders in protests, has been assessed when people rallied in Hong Kong to commemorate the 1989 Tiananmen movement in China. It has been found that Facebook, microblogging services, and other alternative media have evidently facilitated online political connecting activities, mobilization, contributing to active participation and leadership (F. L. F. Lee & Chan, 2015). Likewise, it has been found that social media can convince people to join political movements in the case of Jordan's youth engagement in political participation (Alodat et al., 2023). Since the rise of internet in the 2000s, it has considerably contributed to individuals' participation in public affairs by sharing their opinions and mobilizing

both online and offline political participation. The enhancement of political participation by digital media usage has been researched since the increased popularization of internet usage. Earlier research has shown that although the use of the internet itself has not led to political participation, the intended uses for political movements have significantly been effective. Since social media became popular in the 2000s, burgeoning literature has demonstrated that the use of social media campaigns for public information, opinion sharing, and mobilization convince to both offline and online political participation (Bode et al., 2014; Conroy et al., 2012; Dimitrova et al., 2014; Enjolras et al., 2013; F. L. F. Lee & Chan, 2015; MacAfee & De Simone, 2012; Skoric & Poor, 2013; Tang & Lee, 2013; Towner, 2013; Valenzuela, 2013).

Today, young people who have similar views and political opinions can interact or communicate with each other through various social media platforms. These social media platforms offer opportunities for young people to engage in public debates and demonstrate their opinions, as they were not able to do in the past (Omotayo & Folorunso, 2020). Obviously, social media is capable of overcoming traditional limitations. Social media provides a channel for young people to express their political content and opinions (Moon & Bai, 2020). Social media are notably utilized by most of the young people who are engaged in political protests and mobilization. Hence, social media is classified as a new instrument that facilitates people to enhance political participation, but negative impacts of political participation have also been concerned (Arshad & Khurram, 2020). Some researchers expressed their concerns that social media may not be reliable in politics when young people are deterred from sharing their political content and participation through social media instead of actively participating for effective change. Others have argued that social media is capable of dividing public discourse, as young people can follow like-minded individuals instead of following discussions about people with different opinions (Albanna et al., 2022). Hence, an interaction between political participation and social media is complicated. Although social media is an effective tool for political participation, the benefits are based on certain variables, such as the political environment, content, and demographics of the participants (Chu & Yeo, 2020). Credible research is essential to enhance understanding of the effect of social media on political participation and to ensure specific factors that cause young people to use social media for political participation (AbuAlRub & Abdulnabi, 2020). Undoubtedly, social media has changed the way people interact and communicate with each other, follow news content, and engage in public debates. Social networking websites, such as

Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, have emerged as common social networks in the contemporary world because billions of people use them to connect and interact with their friends, family, and colleagues worldwide (Al Momani, 2020). Social media has provided a space for creating a variety of news content, information, exchange, and accessing them immediately (Ahmed & Cho, 2019). Advantages and disadvantages of social media on different societies have been persistently studied, while the context of political participation has been a major context. According to some academics, social media have contributed to the enhancement and promotion of political participation and involvement among young people (Y. Lee, 2020).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Mobilization Theory

Mobilization Theory defines social media as a dominated instrument that stimulates participation in political activities (Vivian & Elizabeth, 2015). Social media not only supports political activists in strengthening their networks with their supporters but also paves the way for their political events and activities (Casteltrione, 2016). Social media encourages people to participate in political activities, even if they might not have been aware of themselves. Social media enables people to participate in a variety of political activities, such as rallies and demonstrations, and connects young people who share the same political beliefs (Mandrysz, 2016).

2.2.2 Reinforcement Theory

Reinforcement theory defines social media as it might reinforce present political attitudes and behaviors among people rather than bringing them together to engage in new activities (Grishin, 2021). According to this theory, people are more likely to engage in ideas and information that align with their pre-existing beliefs as they prefer to be involved in content that reinforces their pre-existing views (Cheong et al., 2022). Thus, reinforcement theory states that social media has both favorable and unfavorable implications on youth political involvement (Oser & Boulianne, 2020).

3. Research Methodology

The study follows *qualitative research* approach and *documentary analysis* to study the political activities of the Parallel Government (NUG) and its supporters since the military seized power in 2021.

Key resources include journals from Academia, JSTOR, ResearchGate, Google Scholar, Segate, and ISEAS-Yusof Ishak. Information from reputable sources—including ACLED (Armed

Conflict Location and Event Data), Taylor & Francis, the Transnational Institute (TNI), Thammasat University's library, International Crisis Group Myanmar, Myanmar Peace Monitor, the World Bank, United Nations Development Program Myanmar, as well as academic studies and international news reports—has been referenced. Primary sources encompass the official website of the NUG, selective content from the NUG's Facebook pages (including those of the President, Union Prime Minister, United Nations Ambassador, Minister of Health and Education, Ministry of Labor, Social and Humanitarian Affairs, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Education, CRPH, NUCC, and NUG), as well as Facebook pages belonging to prominent supporters such as main celebrities and diaspora individuals. Additionally, statements and reports issued by the NUG constitute primary sources. Relevant Facebook pages of People Defense Forces, statement from the Spring Revolution Alliance (SRA), academic articles, and Justice for Myanmar's contents were also used as selective sources. The Facebook pages mentioned were observed because Myanmar people, both domestically and abroad, participate in politics on Facebook more than on other social media platforms, mainly due to its affordability and timely access.

Documentary analysis is appropriate for implementation given the difficulty in reaching NUG leaders, primarily due to security concerns and undisclosed locations. As a student, challenges include limited access to NUG representatives and budget constraints.

4. Discussions

4.1 The Creation of the National Unity Government (NUG)

The National Unity Government (NUG) was publicly formed on April 16, 2021 by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), a group of elected former lawmakers who won the November 8, 2020 general election. The declaration of uprooting the military dictatorship and establishing a Federal Democratic system was obviously supported both domestically and internationally. The NUG administration has become the central figure since the anti-coup protests were initiated. CRPH primarily formed as a legislative branch, with NUG serving as the executive branch and NUCC serving as a consultative body. Nevertheless, the Judiciary branch and NUG's Police Forces remain ambiguous (Ganesan, 2023; Mmpeacemonitor, 2022; Thuzar et al., 2022). The NUG regime was created to safeguard anti-coup protesters and civilians who were confronted with an armed violent crackdown by the Junta (The Irrawaddy, 2022).

The former state counsellor, Aung San Suu Kyi and former President U Win Myint have been included in the NUG regime. Even though former state counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi is

currently under detention by the military, she is still granted the same position as before the coup (Dayley Robert, 2024; Mmpeacemonitor, 2022). Hence, Duwa Lashi La is acting as the vice president, while Mahn Win Khaing Than is acting as the Union Prime Minister in the NUG regime.

As of 2023, the NUG Administration comprised of 17 Union Ministers and 16 Deputy Prime Ministers (Mmpeacemonitor, 2023). The Ministry of Defense under the NUG is composed of ten military departments, one division, and 360 combat battalions nationwide (The NUG, 2026). Additionally, 277 Local Defense Forces (LDFs) have been established at district and township levels, organized under eleven State and Division LDFs (also known as PakaHpa). Thirty-seven townships are presently under direct control of the NUG, whereas forty townships are encircled by its People's Defense Forces (PDFs). From peaceful demonstrations, the Civil Disobedience Movement, boycotting military-owned enterprises, the formation of CRPH, NUG, NUCC, and their armed wings, to launching the NUG's digital pay currency and developing the Spring Development Bank, all activities initiated via social media.

Earlier analysis of research found that social media platforms also serve the purpose of political discourse. The power of written words and spoken words can be effective when practiced through a well-respected individual, according to Aristotle (Lehmann, 2024). Social media is crucial for public relations as it facilitates organizations and builds relationships with its audience. However, some have disagreed with the potential of social media to enhance political participation. Social media has a tendency to create political polarization and can reduce trust in political institutions (Algharabat et al., 2020). Therefore, social media is likely motivating young people to become involved in political activities, which are defined by a sense of belonging and common objectives. The NUG, alongside its advocates, has undertaken mobilization efforts globally, from Asia to the West, which are likewise described using mobilization theory. For instance, mobilization theory once stated that billions of people have been connected through social media platforms, while the way people engage in political activities has also significantly changed.

Social media platforms offer political activists the opportunity to expand their potential supporters, demonstrate their opinions, share news, and inform social movements (Agojo et al., 2023). Their diverse mobilization methods show beyond theoretical definitions. The NUG, Justice for Myanmar and its supporters' mobilization efforts and implications of a boycott against military-linked enterprises indicate some similarity with the reinforcement theory definition in previous studies. Reinforcement theory defines social media as it might reinforce present

political attitudes and behaviors among people rather than bringing them together to engage in new activities (Grishin, 2021). The mobilization efforts, alongside the rejection of the military's propaganda pages, align with reinforcement theory. Reinforcement theory once stated that people are likely to engage with others who share their present political beliefs and reduce interactions with others whose values are against their views (H. Lin et al., 2023).

5. Answering Research Question and Findings

How the Parallel Government (NUG) and its supporters struggle to gain power and utilize social media to achieve legitimacy? Five key findings include: changing public views via social media terminology; mobilizing diasporas and locals for crowdfunding; organizing protests against State-Owned Enterprises; Myanmar's UN ambassador advocating for human rights; and removing military-linked social media accounts.

5.1 The Shift in Public Perspectives through Social Media

The CRPH was initially declared by the Military as a terrorist organization or traitors of the state, while CRPH immediately hit back to the Military as a 'terrorist armed organization' on March 1, 2021. This idea proves another courageous decisive response of the NUG to respond to the military threat. Afterward, pro-democracy local media outlets with millions of followers, such as Khit Thit Media, the voice of spring, people spring, local media, and Burmese celebrities, reinforced the term 'terrorist organization.' Terms such as 'Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs)' have shifted to 'Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs),' 'Bengali' to 'Rohingya,' 'Democracy' to 'Federal Democracy,' and 'the military' to 'terrorist organization and fascists.' For those who remain employed under the military-controlled departments, they face life threats as the NUG, and its supporters accuse them of being 'Dalans or Informers'. Social media became a key tool for the NUG and its supporters, leading the Junta to block these platforms early in the conflict, believing it was impossible to win online.

5.2 The Mobilization of Crowdfunding Initiatives

Unlike the past, this protest is not only about Myanmar's digital revolution, but also about the democratization of financial services, which is aimed at successfully utilizing social media. They have mobilized individuals and diaspora abroad to fund and move the money. The NUG members, the celebrities, and individual supporters launched independent online donation campaigns as of today. The NUG estimates its annual budget needs at about \$700 million for humanitarian aid and public services. It has raised \$38 million from online bonds, \$7 million from

auctioning General Min Aung Hlaing's home, and \$44 million from online donations. However, these funds still fall short of the annual requirement.

The main source of funds supporters for the NUG and PDFs in domestic are diaspora who live abroad, namely Australia, Thailand, Singapore, Malaysia, the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, Japan, and Korea (International Crisis Group, 2022). One of the significant and prominent social media influencers, Pencilo, the United States-based diaspora, has 1.1 million followers and dominates fundraising campaigns. During March and April, she raised over 2 million US dollars for the Dragonfly Project to acquire anti-aircraft weapons (Abuza Zachary, 2023; International Crisis Group, 2022). Over time, the NUG and its supporters abroad, diaspora's solidarity in coordinating and collaborating mechanism becomes solid and systematic.

5.3 Myanmar's UN Ambassador Called for Action to Stop Junta Atrocities

The Permanent Representative of Myanmar to the United Nations in New York is a vital position. U Kyaw Moe Tun, the representative of Myanmar in the UN, who was assigned during the Aung San Su Kyi elected government, refused to resign and replace Junta's representative (Cambridge University Press, 2021; The Diplomat, 2021). Obviously, the UN is still upholding his position as a Myanmar credential, despite the Junta's attempt to replace him being rejected (Cambridge University Press, 2021; J. Lin & Thuzar, 2022; Thuzar et al., 2022). The atrocities and human rights violations committed by the Junta's security forces on the ground are usually reported by Kyaw Moe Tun to United Nations and international communities. When it became necessary for him to retain his position at the United Nations by year-end, members of the NUG, pro-democracy public figures, diaspora networks, the Aung San Su Kyi party's official Facebook page, and numerous individuals called upon social media users to show online support. As of June 2026, he continues to serve as Myanmar's Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

5.4 Protests State-Owned Enterprises

Another social media campaign witness is a boycott campaign targeted at military-controlled entities and state-owned businesses across the country. The best sell Myanmar beer and cigarettes manufactured by military conglomerates have been impacted and removed from sale at corner shops and convenience stores. Myanmar Beer, the best-selling brew and a joint venture between Kirin and MEHL, experienced a significant decline in its 60 percent market share. The public boycott campaign against paying electricity bills caused significant issues for the military, as electricity bill is a major source of state revenue. Security forces were assigned to protect electricity workers and threatened households that refused to pay by pointing guns at them. Mytel,

a telecommunication company jointly owned by the Vietnamese Ministry of Defense and the Myanmar military, was affected by the campaign and people are avoiding using its SIM cards. Private business sectors, international trade, manufacturing factories and the normal functions of the banking and financial system have ceased their operations, according to Andra MongMao on PRIO portal. Goods exports declined 13% and imports fell 20% within six months as of March 2024 due to impeding land border trades, supplies and the movement of goods (The World Bank, 2024).

5.5 The Removal of Military-Associated Social Media Accounts and Pages

Highly professional and sophisticated political activists, the Justice for Myanmar (JFM) organization has successfully defeated and taken down the military's social media platforms on Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok. This request meets the commitments of earlier Western democratic states to sanctions against military businesses and their political activities due to horrific violations of human rights against protesters. As of January 2026, Meta has already taken down about 270 military-linked business pages and accounts on the Facebook platform. Ministry of Information (MOI) News and MITV channels on YouTube were also terminated from YouTube platform by the company on December 22, 2025. More than 1,000 Facebook pages, groups, and accounts owned by Mytel, a military-owned telecommunication conglomerate, and the Vietnamese Defense Ministry were terminated by Meta.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The National League for Democracy (NLD) party, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, has announced that it will not participate in any negotiations or discussions without her involvement. As of March 2026, most Myanmar civil society groups have supported the ASEAN Five-Point Consensus. Given the ongoing polycrisis in Myanmar, the various parties involved in the conflict could view Democratic States as an alternative external mediator to support dialogue and peace negotiations. According to Associate Professor Sida Sonsri notes, ASEAN faces key challenges due to its geopolitical, economic, demographic, trade, and investment diversity. The 'ASEAN Way' of non-interference principle limits intervening and facilitating among member states. As former state counselor Aung San Suu Kyi grows older, they do not deserve to be in prison at this senior age. However, Aung San Suu Kyi, her cabinet members, and prominent politicians have not released as of April 17, 2026 (ASEAN, 2026).

Ethical Acknowledgement

The researcher declares that ChatGPT (OpenAI) and Copilot were employed solely to refine grammar and enhance the readability of the manuscript. The use of this tool was limited to language editing and did not influence the study design, data collection, analysis, or interpretation. The author is fully accountable for the scholarly integrity and validity of the work.

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