

**‘A Taste of democracy’: Burmese Conception of Democracy in the
Aftermath of the Coup**

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Abbreviations

CDM: Civil Disobedience Movement

CRPH: Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw

EAO: Ethnic Armed Organization

NLD: National League for Democracy

NUCC: National Unity Consultative Council

NUG: National Unity Government

PDF: Peoples' Defence Forces

SLORC: State Law and Order Restoration Council

SPDC: State Peace and Development Council

USDP: Union Solidarity and Development Party

*“So, we just know the **taste of the democracy**. We just started to see that. And then, every, we just know what’s happening around the world. And then, taking back to the dark ages.”*

-Participant 1

“We just have taste around, nearly around 5 to 10 years of democracy so, yeah its like you have planned, every hope you have was destroyed.”

-Participant 9

Abstract

In November 2020, the National League for Democracy, headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, won a landslide victory in the national elections in Myanmar. On February 1, 2021, before the first session of the parliament could convene, the military, known as the Tatmadaw, staged a coup and ousted the democratically elected government. In the aftermath of the coup, there have been widespread protests in Myanmar against the Tatmadaw's rule. Burmese citizens have been advocating for a return to the democratic system, demanding the military to step down. The pro-democracy movement in the country has united different ethnic and religious groups against the military junta. It has also culminated into a Civil Disobedience Movement, as the people are trying to defeat the military. In light of this, as the movement continues against the Tatmadaw's oppressive regime, my research looks into the conception of democracy among Burmese pro-democracy activists. This thesis attempts to understand how the activists in Myanmar perceive democracy, and what they believe are its central tenets, especially in the backdrop of the coup. To answer my question, I conducted semi-structured interviews with the democracy activists. I used thematic analysis on my data, and employed concepts from the Democratic Theory, to present my findings. This thesis derives themes regarding the perception of the democratic system in Myanmar, prior to the coup, and the conception of democracy among the activists.

Keywords: Democratic Theory, Military Coup, Myanmar, National League for Democracy, Pro-Democracy Protests, Tatmadaw

1. Introduction

Located in Southeast Asia, Myanmar is a country known for its ethnic diversity and old culture. It has historically served as a gateway to mainland Southeast Asia. However, surrounded by mountains, it has also stayed isolated over the centuries (Aung et al, 2022). After achieving independence in 1948, the isolationism continued, especially as the country was grappling with military coups, the Burmese way to socialism, and ethnic conflicts (Egretreau, 2008).

Over the past few decades, Myanmar has undergone a tide of changes, with liberalization in the beginning of the century, the turn towards democratization, and the most recent coup in February 2021 (Lintner, 2021). With its distinct cultural and historical background, and its long struggle against the military dictatorship, the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar presents a very interesting research area for Democratic Theory.

Within Democratic Theory, there is no dearth of scholarly debates on the definition of democracy and its scope, as well as the conditions that create a suitable environment to sustain this system and successfully implement it within a country (Dean et al., 2019, 9). An important aspect within this debate has been the cultural background of the country in question. The cultural norms of a country affect the citizens' understanding of democracy. The diversity of these views shapes how people construct their role as citizens, and the functions of a government (Shi, 2014, 192). Therefore, the lived experience of the people within the country, their sense of identity and belongingness, and the way they perceive democracy will impact the kind of system they will establish and maintain within the country (Thornton and Dunn, 2016).

Myanmar is a country with great diversity and a rich culture. It also has a history of colonial rule, military dictatorship, ethnic and religious conflict and a transition towards democracy. This variegated cultural and political backdrop impacts the understanding of democracy among the citizens in Myanmar (Wells, 2019, 195-196). Especially with the ongoing pro-democracy protests, against the military coup, the conception of democracy among the Burmese is an interesting research area within Democratic Theory. With my interest in democracies in Global South, Myanmar provides a complex study into the interplay of these forces that shape democracy, which has inspired me to undertake this research. Therefore, my thesis looks into the conception of democracy and its understanding among the pro-democracy protesters in Myanmar.

The emphasis on a citizen-focused understanding of democracy within this thesis stems from the important role they play in the successful establishment of a democratic system. While institutions and electoral systems play a crucial role in democracy, it is, at the end of the day, the manifestation of the will of the people, and the decentralization of power among the citizens that lie at the core of democracy (EU, 2022). Hence, it cannot be successful solely based on the institutional capacity of a country. This capacity is reinforced by the people who drive it forward, and whose understanding will determine the kind of structure that is best-suited for the country (Coley and Sum, 2012, 3). Building upon this, I have conducted my research with pro-democracy activists in Myanmar.

By undertaking qualitative semi-structured interviews, I aim add another dimension to democratic theory. Previously, this theory has been widely quantified by creating variables for the level of participation, representation, number of political parties and so forth (Osterberg-Kaufmann and Stadelmaier, 2020, 404-405). Here, I attempt to bring in the perspective of the people, their definitions of the key concepts within the democratic theory, and the importance they associate with various aspects of democracy. Conducting a thematic analysis of the data obtained, I present my findings, and answer my research questions, with the hope of contributing to the body of research that exists on this topic.

2. Aim and Research Questions

The aim of my thesis is to unravel the Burmese perception of democracy, and understand what they deem to be the core aspects of democracy. To gain a deeper insight into this, I have formulated the following research questions:

1. How do the pro-democracy activists in Myanmar perceive the democratic system within the country?
2. How do the activists conceive the concept of ‘democracy’?

2.1 Delimitations of the Research

In the course of my research, I conducted 11 interviews with Burmese pro-democracy activists, to answer my research questions. Due to the scope of the thesis and the time available, I was

unable to conduct more interviews with a greater number of participants. Therefore, my research and findings are limited to my sample.

The generalizability of the findings is low in this research, and the questions were not specifically written to obtain patterns, but with the aim of exploring the respondent's idea of democracy. Thus, a delimitation of this research is that it does not speak for the entire population, but only the sample, and it does not concretely establish these patterns as the dominant way of perceiving democracy within the country. Yet it gives a glimpse into the normative understanding of democracy among the activists, and it gives valuable insight regarding how these perceptions affect the support of a certain kind of political system, and the aspirations associated with it.

2.2 Relevance of the Research

We live in a highly interconnected world, with ever growing transnational flows of ideas, capital, human resources and much more. This phenomenon is referred to as globalization. It has led to respatialization, that is, the transformation of social relations and transactions over spatial structures. And as the social geography undergoes a restructuring, it has also prompted a sense of universalization (Scholte, 2005, 16-17). With increasing flows of information, and changing social relations, various ideas are exchanged and cultures and philosophies are becoming increasingly amalgamated across the globe (ibid). This exchange of ideas has encouraged a diverse discourse on universal values, governance systems, political processes and so forth.

With the advancement of this discourse, there has been an increasing focus on the relationship between globalization, and democracy. Some scholars believe that with a universal acceptance of democratic values as good governance practices, and growing interconnectedness, there is a sweep of democratic ideals across the world (Dalpino, 2001). A nation-state's legitimacy is now derived from democracy, and democratic institution within it. With the rise of international and regional institutions, these norms have become ingrained in the political system of the world (ibid).

However, some scholars contend that as globalization makes territories, and the idea of nation-states obsolete, it leads to a decline in democracy (Crockett, 2011). This notion is further strengthened by the recourse to authoritarianism that we are witnessing in the world today. At the end of the cold war, the optimism regarding the universalization of democratic ideas, and

the role of globalization in this universalization was very high. Now, alarmingly, as we are witnessing a wave of autocratization in the world, this optimism is fading. The level of democracy is declining across the globe, and many countries are now moving towards a closed autocracy. There have been five coups in 2021 alone, including the military coup in Myanmar (V-Dem, 2022 6-8).

Thus, we are witnessing a shift towards authoritarianism in the world, and a decline in democratic values. Although this paints a bleak picture of the future, the rise in protests against authoritarianism can be seen as a silver lining. In Myanmar, people are uniting against the military junta, to reinstate a democratically elected government. Thus, while Myanmar is a part of the backsliding process in the world, the citizens are also a part of democratic resistance against the said backsliding (Timalsina, 2021). This movement can inspire democracy activists and inform democratic scholars across the world. Yet, for that, we must first understand how democracy is perceived among the Burmese activists, to analyse the core values they associate with the concept, before we present the example in the wider scholarship of political science. For this very reason, I have undertaken this research, to bring a contextual understanding of democracy to the field. With a research interest in democracies in the Global South, and hailing from India, another democratic country with a diverse population, which shares a border with Myanmar, I have been interested in this case for a while, hence, I undertook this research.

3. An Insight into the History and Background of Myanmar

3.1 The Military Coup and Pro-Democracy Protests

November 8, 2020, had marked a historic day for Myanmar, as the country conducted its second democratic elections (Kipgen, 2021, 1). The election was decisive, with the National League for Democracy [NLD], led by Aung San Suu Kyi, winning a landslide victory. The main opposition to the NLD was the Union Solidarity and Development Party [USDP], backed by the military [also known as the Tatmadaw] (ibid, 3). On losing to the NLD, the USDP alleged electoral fraud and manipulation of votes (Kyed and Nielsen, 2022). However, the election commission in the country rejected these allegations and validated the victory of NLD on January 28, 2021 (Charney, 2021). Following this, on February 1, 2021, when the parliament was due to convene for the first time, the military staged a coup and seized power in Myanmar (ibid, 12).

Since then, the country has been under the dictatorship of the Tatmadaw. In response to this coup, the Burmese citizens have been leading widespread protests in the country, demanding for the democratically elected government to be reinstated (Maizland, 2022). However, the military continues to stay in power, as the conflict exacerbates (Nachemson and Fishbein, 2022). The brutal suppression of these protests have resulted in more than 1300 deaths of civilians and over 11,000 detentions in the country. The situation remains very dire for the people (ibid).

3.2 The Formation and Role of Tatmadaw in Burmese History

Since Myanmar became independent from British colonial rule in 1948, the military forces in the country, known as the Tatmadaw, have played a central role in Burmese politics. During the second world war, on 26th December, 1941, Aung San, along with some like-minded young men, created the Burmese Independence Army (Yeni, 2005). During that time, the army was preoccupied with fighting insurgencies arising out of ethnic clashes in the country. To stop these clashes, in 1947, Aung San orchestrated the Panglong Conference, bringing together all the ethnic minority leaders to create a Union of Burma (Steinberg, 2021, 2). In 1948, he also negotiated with the British to gain independence, and thus, Myanmar as we know it was formed. His role in establishing the army, building national unity and bringing independence gave him, and the military a revered position in the country (ibid, 2).

Months after independence, a civil war broke out in the country, and General Aung San was assassinated (Silverstein, 1990, 116). As the fighting continued, the Tatmadaw, took over the government (Myint-U, 2019, 43). That is when the military rule in Myanmar began, which was to last for over half a century and lead to the latest coup.

3.3 Tatmadaw's Rule and the Rise of NLD

The Tatmadaw implemented the “Burmese Way to Socialism’ in the country, following their ascension in 1962. Under this system, political parties and protests were banned, censorship was imposed, and the judicial system was destroyed. A military-controlled political system was being set up in the country (Steinberg, 2021, 9-12). However, by the end of 1980s, the failure of this system was becoming glaringly obvious. The economy was suffering from high inflation, and Myanmar was classified as one of the Least Developed Nations in the world by the United Nations (Ebbighausen, 2013). The condition was quickly worsening, with rising

unemployment and food shortages in several areas (Silverstein, 1990, 123). In August 1988, there erupted full-scale demonstrations against the military rule, fuelled by the anger over the economic situation in the country (Ebbighausen, 2013). Led by students, this protest began to draw widespread public support. During that time, Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of Aung San, emerged as the leading voices of the protests, demanding a democratic system in the country (Silverstein, 1990, 124-126).

Her rally for democracy and bringing power back ‘to the people’ became attractive ideas for the protestors (Myint-U, 2019, 53-55). She, in collaboration with Aung Gyi and other leaders, formed the National League for Democracy [NLD] on September 27, 1988, a pro-democracy party, and the major opposition to military rule.

In the aftermath of the protests, the State Law and Order Restoration Council [SLORC] was set up, to hold multi-party elections in the country. Unsurprisingly, the NLD won the elections, however, the SLORC, a proxy of the Tatmadaw, nullified the elections, and regained control of the country (Steinberg, 2021, 15).

3.4 The 2008 Constitution and Tatmadaw’s Continued Hegemony

With the junta back in power, under the veneer of SLORC, a constitution was being drafted to enable a democratic transition. Renaming the SLORC to the State Peace and Development Council [SPDC], the Tatmadaw spent nearly two decades, writing, and rewriting the constitution, with the aim of protecting their key interests, namely the political stronghold and the economic influence in the country (Mathieson, 2010). In 2008, the constitution was finally completed, and the draft embedded an electoral authoritarian structure (Clapp, 2015, 2).

This constitution ensured military dominance over the civilian government, with a quarter of the seats in the parliament assigned for the Tatmadaw appointees. It also gave the Commander-in-Chief of the armed forces, equal power as that of the Vice-President, and reserved ministries of defence, security, home affairs and border security for military officers recommended by the commander-in-chief (Pearson et al., 2008, 44-45).

In 2010 elections were held in the country, but they were boycotted by the NLD, on grounds that the constitution was undemocratic. As a consequence, the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party [USDP] won the elections.

This time, ex-military general Thein Sein came to power, and he brought a slew of economic and political reforms within the country. The most landmark decision of his regime was the amendment to the bill regarding the party registration. It enabled the NLD to register for the upcoming by-elections in 2012, which they won, and it paved a way for the party to enter the parliament and compete in the next national elections (Myint-U, 2019, 152). The 2015 election results came as no surprise, when NLD won a landslide victory, and assumed power in Myanmar. NLD's victory was celebrated both nationally and internationally, as Myanmar was seen as a democratising nation in South East Asia, after years of military dictatorship (Roewer, 2017).

3.5 The Rohingya Crisis and Ethnic Conflict in Myanmar

In the western part of Myanmar, is the Rakhine State. It used to be Arakan Kingdom, and the people living there today, are known as the Rohingyas (Albert and Maizland, 2020). In 1982, the Citizenship law was enacted by the Tatmadaw, where the Rohingyas were denied citizenship, on claims that they were not a part of the ethnic races of Myanmar. Over the years, the brutal oppression by the military continued and their rights were repressed (ibid). There had been violent attacks against them time and again, in 1978, 1991 and in 2017, which led to their exodus to Bangladesh (OCHA, 2022).

In 2019, Aung San Suu Kyi was invited to the International Court of Justice for a hearing against the case file by The Gambia, to discuss the crimes perpetrated by the military. However, she defended the military, receiving severe backlash from the international actors (Bowcott, 2019). Within the country, with military propaganda on social media platforms, and Aung San Suu Kyi's stance, it polarised the society against the plight of the Rohingya Muslims, deepening an ethno-religious divide in the country.

The shadow of the brutal oppression lingered till this military coup, where the majority began to witness the cruelty of the Tatmadaw, and came to the realization of the gravity of the offence they had committed against the Rohingyas.

3.6 The Rise of CRPH and NUG in the Aftermath of the Coup

In the aftermath of the coup, the exiled parliamentarians and elected representatives came together to form the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw [CRPH]. Formed on the 5th

of February, 2021, this committee looked towards creating an interim government and obtaining international recognition, while pressuring the military to step down (Thuzar and Min Tun, 2022, 4). They released the Federal Democracy Charter on 31st March, 2021, declaring the old constitution invalid, and created the National Unity Government [NUG], an interim body consisting of the ousted members of the parliament, as well as leaders of various Ethnic Armed Organizations [EAO] (ibid, 5).

The key agenda of NUG has been to reinstate a democratic government, and to ensure that all ethnic communities are represented in this government, for a peaceful future. To that end, the National Unity Consultative Council [NUCC] was also formed, as a consultative body to the interim government (ibid, 5). Along with that, the People's Defence Force [PDF] has been created, the armed branch of the NUG, fighting against the Tatmadaw. Additionally, government workers and people in the public sector have been resigning, and joining the Civil Disobedience Movement [CDM]. The aim of this movement is to cripple the functioning of the military regime by not going to work. As these groups have emerged, along with popular protests in Myanmar, so has the crackdown by the military become more severe (NUG, 2021, 3). Yet, these groups and protests persist in Myanmar, in the hope of removing the military to achieve a peaceful democratic future.

4. Previous Literature

Before embarking upon my own research, I delved into the existing scholarship regarding democracy in Myanmar. To understand the conception of democracy among pro-democracy protesters in Myanmar, and their perception of the current system, I familiarised myself with the existing debates about democracy, before I narrowed down my theoretical tools to analyse my data with. Hence, in this section, I explore the existing scholarship. The literature on democracy and Myanmar is wide-ranging, however, it can be broadly categorised into three topics.

Within the first category, we find literature on military and its role in the country. Myanmar has been under military dictatorship for over half a century and that has had a significant impact on the politics of the nation. In 2012, as the country was transitioning towards a quasi-civilian rule from a military dictatorship, the literature focussed on the role of the military in the democratic system of Myanmar, and the consolidation of its influence amid the transition

(Farrelly, 2013, 314; Bünthe, 2011, 6). The Tatmadaw's influence is primarily attributed to the 2008 constitutional safeguards, that grant it a quarter of the seats in the parliament, and the power to dismiss the parliament at will (Jaffrey, 2021). There is a consensus among authors that Tatmadaw's efforts for a transition toward democratization are a result of negotiations with the citizens, in the aftermath of the 2007 protests. The transition, coming into effect by the turn of the decade, in 2011, gave the military time to protect its interests through the elevated status in the constitution, and by controlling the democratization process (Slater, 2011, 128, David and Holliday, 2018, 52-54).

In a similar vein, Guo (2009, 6), argues that demanding change from the military is fairly easy, however, 'the real challenge remains, that is, how to break the political deadlock and make any meaningful political transition tenable'. Yet Guo found it difficult to envision a civilian government without military support. The argument presented was that the military, having stayed in power for so long, and asserting its authority for national integration among different ethnic groups, was likely to become irrelevant, or absent from politics (ibid, 23-24). Although Bünthe (2016, 370) expressed similar thoughts, yet he had a more optimistic take, viewing this instead as a protracted transition which gave the opportunity for oppositional forces and ethnic groups to renegotiate with the military. While agreeing on the top-down structure of this process, Bünthe stated that the transition, being led by General Thein Sein, did allow the NLD more room to manoeuvre reforms for democratization. It also gave more freedom to civil society to expand and function (ibid, 390-391). Nevertheless, he did caution that this would only be possible if the NLD could renegotiate for the dominant position in national politics from the Tatmadaw (ibid, 391).

Thus, a significant amount of literature focuses on the role of the Tatmadaw in Myanmar, and the struggle between them, and the civilian government, to consolidate power. Yet largely, the scholars agree that the Tatmadaw will not easily concede power, which is now evidenced by the February 2021 coup. In light of the coup, as this strand of literature narrows down on the role of the Tatmadaw in relation to the democratization process in Myanmar, another group of scholars are concerned with the impact of ethnic diversity in the country on the democratic system.

Within this category, there is a consensus among scholars that for Myanmar to achieve a stable democracy, the question of ethnic conflict must be addressed (Sadan, 2016, 215; David and Holliday, 2018, 109; Smith, 2005, 282). One of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world,

the ethnic and religious minorities have often been subject to marginalization and persecution within the state (David and Holliday, 2018, 108). Stokke (2020, 312), argues that the military-led transition in Myanmar has constrained the scope of democracy, especially in relation to the representation of different ethnicities in the government. At the same time, this military oppression of the ethnic minorities has acted as a catalyst in their pursuit of democracy. These minority groups have advocated democracy, promoting self-determination, human rights and freedoms (Smith, 2005, 280-281).

However, Lee (2015, 26) contends that although the democratic transition is meant to enhance cooperation between multi-ethnic and religious groups, it has not been the case in Myanmar. Similarly, Nilsen (2013, 116-117) also asserts that semi-democracies are more likely to face conflicts, and democratization alone is not an answer to solving all conflicts. Without an inclusive system, which gives political representation to all ethnic minorities, a lasting solution to the conflict cannot be possible (ibid).

With the hypothesis that democratization alone is not a solution for a stable future in Myanmar, scholars have also explored the concept of ‘federalism’, and federal democracy in Myanmar, that aims to create an inclusive system which grants representation and autonomy to all minorities (Kipgen, 2015, 412). Since the achievement of independence in 1948, ethnic minorities have pushed for a federal democratic union, to ensure equality and self-determination for the minorities. However, the military has been opposed to this structure, equating this with the disintegration of the union (ibid).

Smith (2005, 282-285) contests that for a peaceful transition to democracy, ‘federalism’ itself is not enough either. It has to accompany a process of reversing the denigration and distrust with which the minorities have been treated, improving their representation in the national parliament and ensuring that the ethnic minority states are given equal opportunities to develop. Thus, for them, democracy in Myanmar goes a step further beyond territorial autonomy for minorities, to incorporate a change in the interaction between the government, the majority and the minorities (ibid, 285).

Accordingly, the discussion on a federal system is ongoing, and has come to the forefront as the pro-democracy protestors in Myanmar have been advocating for it since the coup (South, 2021, 441). Yet, at the very core of the discussion, there is the consensus that for a stable democratic system, Myanmar needs to address its ethnic and religious conflicts.

The third category of literature, which was most relevant to my research, was on the perception of democracy among Burmese citizens. The most notable work among this, was by The Asia Foundation (2014, 11), which was a comprehensive survey of the economic, social and political values of the citizens of Myanmar. The team conducted over 3000 face-to-face interviews across all the 14 states of the country, to gauge the state-society relations, especially in the context of the transition from a military rule towards a quasi-civilian government in 2011, and the upcoming nation-wide elections in 2015 (ibid).

This survey followed an inductive approach to data analysis. As articulated by Thomas (2003, 2), this approach is useful for qualitative data, as it allows for themes to emerge. By developing summary themes, patterns emerging within the data can be observed (ibid). These patterns are presented by the report, based on the responses obtained from the sample. For instance, the data suggests that public knowledge regarding governance structure is low, or that the basic understanding of democracy for people is ‘freedom’, ‘rights and law’, and ‘peace’ (The Asia Foundation, 2014, 12-14).

However, to better understand the implications of its results, it is also important to first look into what democracy means. According to Bray and Slaughter (2015, 12), democracy is a system of political practices where the people govern themselves. As per Beetham (1993, 58), it is a way of ensuring that people have control over the decision-making process of the government. Democratic theory delves into the feasibility of these practices, and the extent to which these practices can be embodied within a state. Yet, before we analyse the soundness and applicability of these processes, it is important to come to a consensus regarding the purpose that the process is meant to serve, and those who will be a part of the process (ibid, 58-59).

In Myanmar, democracy increasingly took the notion of driving the military out of politics, and the concept of ‘democracy’ was largely unexplored. As Thant Myint-U (2019, 66) states in his book, that for Burmese, “Democracy became the new buzzword”. The association of this word, for the people of Myanmar, was closely tied with their aspiration for a better life, in terms of socio-economic opportunities in the country. Thus, the understanding of democracy, for people, stemmed largely from their history and lived experience, which informed the general will of the country (Clifford, 2020; Marston and Kurlantzick, 2019).

Summarising, there are three broad categories of literature regarding democracy and Myanmar. The first category looks at the role of military in the transition to democracy, its continued influence, and the constitutional structure that safeguards its interests. The second category

focuses more on equality and representation, examining how ethnic and religious diversity affect the democratic system in Myanmar, and if federalism could compliment the system for a stable future. The last category looks into the perception of the concept of democracy among the citizens. These academic works have been crucial in exploring the various aspects of democracy and the way it has played out in Myanmar's context. However, with the most recent coup, and the pro-democracy activists fighting for a democratic structure, and demanding the Tatmadaw to step down, my research looks into how these activists perceived the democratic regime of NLD in Myanmar, and their understanding of the concept of democracy, as they advocate for it. Before I present my data and findings on these questions, it is important to look into the theoretical tools that helped me analyse the data and ground myself with concepts that are key to democracy and democratic theory.

5. Theoretical Tools for Understanding Democracy

“My argument is that in the final analysis the existence of democracies depends, on other things being equal, on the popularization of the idea of democracy, in the sense that a clear understanding of what democracy is about is a major condition (although not the only one) for behaving democratically. For wrong ideas about democracy make a democracy go wrong.”

G. Sartori, 1973

In this section, I will look into the debates within the scholarship of Democratic Theory. This theory aims to define democracy, and grapples with the set of conditions that make it successful (Dean et al., 2019, 6). These scholarly discussions have been valuable tools for me for engaging with the meaning and key aspects of democracy, especially with defining the role of the people, in creating and sustaining a democratic structure. Since my research is people-centric, and the understanding they have of these concepts is paramount to my thesis, it was essential for me to engage with the theoretical tools and clarify these concepts before I engaged with the participants.

We live in a world where democracy is a precondition to international recognition. Government systems derive their legitimacy by implementing a democratic structure (Murphy, 1999, 545). Hence, it becomes paramount to ask what democracy means and what principles it denotes.

For democracy is linked to popular consent, and this consent is ‘the product of what an electorate believes a democracy to be; it depends on the sort of democracy the voters deem to be true’ (Sartori, 1973, 6).

Within the scholarship, we can observe a multitude of definitions for democracy, and various approaches to gauging its nature and scope. While the debates on its definition and meaning are ongoing, democracy, in its most basic form, can be understood as the rule of the people (Sørensen, 1998, 3). This again leads to questions about the kind and scope of rule envisioned, the level of participation among people, and who ultimately, are included within this group (ibid). Another question that arises of this definition is the relationship between the people and the power. It becomes impertinent to answer who wields the power, and over whom (Sartori, 1973, 24).

Democratic Theory deals with these questions to answer what democracy is, and its various conceptions. It also looks into various instruments that are employed to achieve a democratic system (Dean et al., 2019, 6-7). While this theory is subject to its own internal debates, it provides a platform to understand the central tenets of democracy, which is especially important when a nation is in the process of, or aspiring to set up this system with any degree of success, as is the case with Myanmar.

Coming back to the questions posed earlier, democracy is a system of governance, where ‘power belongs to the people’, in the sense that it emanates from popular will, and is granted freely (Sartori, 1973, 26). Drawing further on Sartori’s (ibid) work, it is a free society where the relationship between the governors and the governed is consistent with the notion that the State exists to serve the society. Although different forms of democracy exists, within Myanmar, there has been a system of an electoral, representative democracy. In this system, even though the people do not wield the power themselves, they grant it to representatives, who are elected by the masses and are responsible to them (ibid, 24-25).

Thus, we come to the basic premise that we need to define the people who belong to the state and are a part of the general will, who in turn, are considered the actual custodians of power. Therefore, inclusion becomes an important aspect within the theory. Additionally, this power is delegated to the governors who are responsible to the people, to execute the general will and establish a system to serve them (Urbinati and Warren, 2008, 389). This brings us to defining representation within the system. And these concepts come together, when we employ the tool used to achieve them, that is, elections. They provide a way of bridging the people with the

representatives, to ensure that the general will is relayed and the representatives stay responsible and accountable to the people (ibid).

5.1 Inclusion and Democratic Theory

As mentioned above, and since the emphasis on people is reinforced time and again within this theory, who belong within this group of people is a crucial question within democracy. Democratic inclusion concerns itself with determining who has a claim in democratic polity. At its very basic level, this inclusion comes from political boundaries (Bauböck, 2018, 1). People within the boundaries of the nation state can have a say in the decision making. Out of all the people within this territory, the right to participate in decision making is restricted based on age, nationality and several other criteria.

Bauböck (2018, 19), within his framework of democratic inclusion, stresses upon the agency of both, those who govern and those who are governed, as encompassed within the system. The institutions decide who are eligible to be a part of the process. He further elaborates that this inclusion also ensures that a democratic government is responsible to all those who are included, and that their rights and freedoms are protected. The interests of everyone included must be taken into account, and they must be subject to equal protection under the law (ibid, 20).

In Myanmar, the idea of inclusion came to the forefront during the Rohingya refugee crisis of 2017. Having been denied citizenship in 1982 by the military (Brett and Hlaing, 2020, 2), they had been marginalized and excluded for decades (Waller, 2020). This termed as a flagrant breach of democracy, however, the underlying argument remained that since these communities were not a part of the Burmese ethnicity, they were not entitled to the same rights (ibid).

This incident threw the question of inclusion and political equality in sharp relief in Myanmar. It only served to reinforce the crucial role that inclusion plays in democracy, and in determining who are entitled to political rights and protection within the state. In addition to this, representation is also an equally important tenet of democracy. Once citizenship is made more diverse and inclusive, it is also essential to ensure that mechanisms are present in the state to allow minorities to voice their needs (Cordenillo, 2017). I will explore this concept in detail in the following section.

5.2 Representation and Democratic Theory

Representation is a very broad concept within Democratic Theory, and is often defined in various ways. One of the most comprehensive works on this concept is by Pitkin, where she breaks it down into four categories. Among them, scholars have used the descriptive type or the substantive type of representation to discuss it in relation to ethnic minorities (Zhanarstanovaa and Nechayeva, 2015, 77).

Descriptive Representation stands for the manner in which the representative ‘stands for’ the populace, based on shared characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity and so forth. This is important to give the disadvantaged groups a chance to participate in the political sphere, which ameliorates the level of inequality in representation, and safeguards their interests (Kurebwa, 2015, 52). And Substantive Representation refers to the actions a representative takes in order to secure the interests of the people they are standing for. Thus, by acting on behalf of the group, the representative responds to policy decisions in a way that furthers the interests of the represented (ibid, 53).

Myanmar is one of the most ethnically diverse nations in the world, with a history of military dictatorship (Maizland, 2022). With a history of ethnic conflicts, and over 135 different ethnic communities, setting up a democratic system that represents the interests of all the groups is not an easy feat (Gravers, 2007, 5). As the people are protesting against the military coup, the interim government NUG has incorporated members from the parliament ousted by the coup, as well as leaders of ethnic armed organizations, to create an inclusive cabinet and harness the ethnic unity against the Tatmadaw (Maizland, 2022). In these circumstances, it becomes necessary to understand how the representation of different communities will pan out, especially as the citizens protest to reinstate a democratic system.

While these concepts look into how the democratic system is understood within the country, the expectations out of such a system, and the way it is perceived by the people, based on their personal experience, also impacts their understanding of democracy as a concept. Within this, the quality of life and the level of political and civil liberties that people enjoy, becomes an important aspect of democracy. They were also important concepts explored by my respondents. Hence, I have elucidated it further in the following sections.

5.3 Quality of Life and Democratic Theory

Rueschemeyer has stated that, “Democratic government and generous social policies are both critical qualities of good societies” (2008, 407). He is one of the many scholars engaged in the recurring discussion regarding the relationship between democracy and the quality of life of the citizens. Sasaoka and Seki (2011, 343) stress upon the importance of this discussion since, “The nature of the political regime matters because it conditions political rights and civil liberties that citizens enjoy”. According to them, there is a correlation between the degree of rights and liberties that citizens enjoy, and the quality of life, as the former affects the prospects for life, thus, having an impact on the latter (ibid).

However, some scholars focus on the role of democratic institutions, such as the electoral system and the political parties within the nation, instead of the level of civil liberties. They assert that if these institutions function well, the demands of the citizens are relayed to the government and their needs are met (ibid, 347).

On the other hand is the argument that democracy can be understood from the perspective of the citizens, and not just the institutional capacity of a country. Thus for the citizens, “They evaluate how their own political regime relates to their subjective happiness”, and their quality of life affects their evaluation of the political regime (ibid). This means that democratic institutions and their role are not solely responsible for improving the quality of life of the citizens. As per, Frey and Al-Roumi (1999, 75), there are two more mechanisms through which the quality of life of the citizens can be improved. It is the presence of free press and opposition parties, which hold the government accountable and expand discourse in society, creating pressure on the government to address the needs of the people (ibid).

In Myanmar, after the NLD government came to power, the freedom of expression and press significantly increased, allowing people to criticise the government, raise their voices in dissent, while eliminating the fear of arrest for exercising this right. Along with democratic institutions, these liberties were also responsible in improving the quality of life of the Burmese.

5.4 Federalism and Democratic Theory

Now, we come to the final theoretical tool employed within this thesis. This concept was explored post the interviews, as the respondents brought it up during the interviews. It is the concept of federalism, which has gained a lot of traction in Myanmar, following the coup.

Federalism is a philosophy of organising the government in a nation-state, which practices a combination of centralization and decentralization of certain powers (O’Leary, 2022). It is a constitutional mechanism to divide power among different units within the state while ensuring that the central government remains the custodian of certain aspects of the society (Bulmer, 2017, 3). Thus, a federal system is divided in communities, usually defined by the territorial boundaries, that practice autonomy over certain matters of the public sphere that are relevant to them, while at the same time, being a part of, and subordinate to, the larger national union (ibid, 4). Elazar has cogently summarised it as the system of combining ‘self-rule’ and ‘shared rule’ (O’Leary, 2022).

Similarly, Bulmer argues, ‘Federalism attempts to reconcile a desire for unity and communality on certain issues with a desire for diversity and autonomy on others’ (2017, 5). Therefore, it is seen as an institutional solution to the challenges posed by scale and diversity on effective governance. Centralization of power leads to the dominance of certain elites in the political process, which makes the citizens far removed from the government, and creates a hindrance in getting their voices heard (ibid, 6). It also prevents the interests of small groups from being trumped by the majority, thus protecting the minority by meeting their demands (ibid, 7). Modern federalism looks at limiting the will of the national majority, as the basis of legislation. Formal institutional set-up is arranged such that the majority is not the sole expression of the sovereignty of the people (Whitaker, 1983, 2). Thus, it does not entail the dilution of democratic principle of the will of the people, instead, it redefines democratic citizenship in a more diverse, and complex manner (ibid).

Robert Dahl, one of the leading scholars within Democratic Theory, agrees that federalism is often necessary in states, to guarantee political rights to all citizens, so that the democratic process can exist (1983, 100). However, many scholars have argued that it can deepen the divide and conflict within a nation. Benz (2020), furthers this stance by focussing on the need for coordination among different groups that is necessary in a federal system. As autonomous groups are linked together, it becomes increasingly challenging to achieve this coordination, which makes it equally difficult to democratically implement policies across the nation. Secondly, he argues, federalism might be ‘demos-enabling’, however, it can also create a fragmented society, which leads to an increase of conflicts among the diverse groups (ibid). Miller (2007, 7) counters these arguments through a different perspective on identity. She agrees that in a federal system, people feel more bound to the sub-units they belong to, and have multiple levels of identities. Yet, when the centre undertakes the duty to represent the

citizens, it brings together a sense of national identity among diverse communities. The multiple level of identity is also conducive then, for multiple levels of governance (ibid, 2007, 6-8).

Thus, a federal system protects minority rights and grants them autonomy, which enables a continuation and preservation of their culture, language and religion within the state. This minimises attempts of succession and political conflicts and the people harbour multiple identities (Follesdal, 2018). It also increases the opportunity for participation of citizens in decision-making process, and ensures that each group gets a chance to express their needs and opinions. Although it is believed that Federalism challenges Democratic Theory, it is primarily concerned with distribution of power and restriction on majority rule, a sentiment also echoed by the Democratic Theory, within its attempts to provide solution against the ‘tyranny of majority’ (ibid). Therefore, it will not be remiss to conclude that federalism can be conducive to a democratic process, especially in ethnically diverse nations like Myanmar.

Thus, we have the theoretical tools of inclusion, representation, quality of life, and federalism, with which the interview data has been analysed. However, before I present the analysis, I will first elaborate on my research method and the process through which I obtained this data.

6. Research Method

6.1 Semi-Structured Interviews

After formulating my research questions, my first concern was to determine which research method I would employ to answer my questions. Since I wanted to understand the perception of the people, I employed qualitative semi-structured interviews to gather relevant information for my research. Semi-structured interviews are a flexible approach towards qualitative interviews, designed such that the researcher obtains unexpected insights and responses (Ryan et al., 2009, 310). Within this method, the researcher creates a guide of open-ended questions to ask the respondent, and their answers steer the course of the questions (Jamshed, 2014, 87). Many follow-up questions are asked based on the responses; to facilitate an in-depth understanding of the topic at hand, and to give the respondents a chance to articulate their thoughts more broadly (ibid).

To understand the idea of democracy within the minds of the Burmese pro-democracy protesters, and the values they associate with a democratic system, it was essential for me to employ a method that enabled them to express their views. I had to ensure that the questions were open-ended and flexible. This enabled them to expound upon their responses and gave me a chance to explore tangents that I had not expected within the research.

6.1.1 Sampling Approach and Size in the Research

As I decided on the research method, I was then occupied with determining the sampling approach and size, such that my sample could help me successfully conduct my research. Since my question is specific to the conception of democracy of the pro-democracy activists, I undertook purposive sampling for my thesis. Purposive sampling in research refers to the selection of participants by the researcher in a strategic manner. The goal is to conduct research with the participants who are most relevant to the research questions posed (Bryman (2012, 418). Thus, my sample consisted of 11 participants, all of whom were involved in the pro-democracy struggle, in various ways. Six of my respondents were physically involved in the anti-military, and pro-democracy struggles, by participating in protests, while the others were working with organizations promoting the movement, planning and coordinating different aspects of the movement among their communities, or providing humanitarian aid to the victims of military crackdown.

Within this purposive sampling approach, I undertook maximum variation sampling, to gather a wide variety of data within the research interest (ibid, 419). Since Myanmar is known for its ethnic and religious diversity, I wanted a sample of respondents from various ethnic and religious backgrounds, so that I could gain a holistic understanding of their perception of democracy. Accordingly, seven of the respondents were from Bamar majority and four of them were from the ethnic minorities of Mon, Zomi, Kachin and Shan. Two of the total respondents identified themselves as Christians, and four of them identified as Buddhists. The others were not explicit about the religious identity they associated themselves with. Thus, I was able to explore a variety of perspectives to draw my themes from, which made my research more nuanced.

As I was conducting the interviews, the second concern for me was to determine how many interviews were necessary to successfully answer my questions. According to scholars such as Charles Ragin and Henry Wolcott, a researcher must conduct interviews till the data collected

becomes repetitive. On achieving saturation of qualitative sampling, one can stop (Baker and Edwards, 2012, 5). At the same time, as Adler and Adler emphasize, time constraints and the scope of the research also influence the number of interviews one conducts (ibid, 10). Thus, the number of interviews conducted will also depend on the scope of the thesis and the time a researcher has for the said project.

Per the time and the scope of this thesis, I collected 11 interviews in total, lasting between 31:44 minutes to 01:08:12 minutes. These were in-depth interviews, where I delved into the participants' idea of democracy, the current political climate, and the political outlook towards Myanmar. The aim of these interviews was to gain a deep insight into the conception of democracy within the country and as a concept, among the pro-democracy activists. By the end of all the interviews, not only did I find that I had achieved saturation in my sample, but I also had in-depth data to analyse for my thesis, which would be feasible for me with the time I had.

6.1.2 Logistical Management of the Interviews

Of my participants, five were based outside the country. Two were in Sweden, of whom one was in Gothenburg, and agreed for an in-person interview. The others were in Germany, Japan and Thailand. They had family members or relatives living in Myanmar, or acquaintances, through whom they were connected to the happenings on-ground. Of all my interviews, I conducted one in-person interview in Gothenburg, seven on the video calling platform of Zoom, one on Facebook and two on the messaging app Signal.

After obtaining their consent, I asked them for permission to record the audio of the interviews on the voice recording application in my phone. All of them consented to the recording, however two of the respondents requested that I delete the recordings after I had transcribed my interviews. Thus, after I transcribed all of my interviews into separate word documents on my laptop, I deleted audio recordings of two of the interviews, as requested. After the submission and final grading of my thesis, I will be deleting the rest of the audio recordings as well, in order to protect the identity and safety of the respondents.

While planning the logistical elements of the interviews, especially in dealing with the audios and the safety of the participants, I came to one of the most crucial aspects of my research methods, that is, the ethical considerations while conducting these interviews. These are elaborated further in the following section.

6.2 Ethical Considerations Within the Research

In conducting these interviews, one of the most vital concerns was regarding the ethics of the research. With the ongoing military rule and persecution of protestors, I had to ensure that none of my respondents were in any danger while participating in my research. Hence, ethical considerations became paramount. In a research, ethics are considered to be norms formulated with underlying moral precepts, that are conscious and motivated. They are a crucial part of determining the relationship between the participants and the researchers, and how the respondents are treated (Swedish Research Council, 2017, 12). Various ethical principles must be upheld during the research. Of them, as I mentioned earlier, the 'do no harm' principle, obtaining informed consent, and protection of data obtained, were of primary focus in my research.

According to Bryman (2012, 135), any research that can likely harm the participants will be considered unacceptable. Thus, any form of physical, emotional, psychological, or any impact that adversely affects the participants must be avoided. This principle was very relevant to my methods, as many participants were risking persecution from the military junta for participating in the interview. For the participants based in Myanmar, it was essential, that all contact established through social media platforms was closely guarded, since the military junta is known to monitor the Facebook accounts of activists (Potkin and Lone, 2021). Thus, although initial contact was set up through Facebook for a few participants, any further discussion and the exchange of zoom links for interviews was done through the platform 'Signal', an encrypted messaging service preferred by the pro-democracy activists in Myanmar, which was difficult to track by the military. Additionally, all the participants have been kept anonymous in my research. I assigned them abbreviations derived from their names, but their full names have been hidden to protect their identity.

Secondly, it was important to gain their informed consent regarding the interviews. This entailed two concerns within itself. First, was that the data collected reflected on their opinion, and their dissatisfaction with the military coup, and their fight against it. Since they were admitting to their involvement in the pro-democracy struggle, or expressing solidarity with the movement, it was essential that they made these admissions, fully aware of the nature and scope of the research. Hence, before each interview, the participants were informed of the scope of this research, its purpose, and my plan for using the information obtained. In addition, I had to make sure I gave them ample opportunity to say no to the interview, or contact me later if they felt the risk was too great. This was to ensure that their safety was not compromised, either

during the conduction of primary research, or after, in the writing process. The second aspect of the informed consent was regarding the nature and scope of the research itself. For some participants, these interviews were a chance for them to engage in a conversation regarding the movement, and a way of articulating their opinion. However, this research is undertaken as a requirement for the masters' course, and will only be published within the university archives. Hence, for any participants looking to advocate against the military, this was not a platform that could amplify their voices. Particularly with one participant, who felt guilty for not being able to physically join the movement in Myanmar, her participation in the interview seemed like a way for her to contribute to the struggle, although that was not the intent of this research. Hence, it was important for me to be clear with the purpose of this research, so that the participants were informed of the impact of their role within the research, and gave the information fully aware of the consequences.

Finally, the data obtained from the interviews had to be safely preserved, while keeping the participants anonymous. I connected to five of my participants through Facebook. Thus, if the interviews are not kept anonymous, and the data is not protected, it would be easy for anyone to track the identity of the participants. This would endanger two of them, who are residing in Myanmar, and the families of the rest. To make sure they were at no risk, I ensured that all Facebook communication was promptly deleted, so that there remains no visible trace of the discussions regarding the interview. And all the interview transcriptions and their personal information was stored on my laptop, which is password-protected, not on any cloud or drive on the internet, thus allowing only myself to access the data.

7. Interview Analysis: Part I

This is the crux of my research. Here, I present quotes from the interviews I conducted, and connect it with the various concepts I explored previously in Democratic Theory. This section focusses on presenting my data, and analysing it, so that my findings can be organized and my research questions can be answered.

I have divided my analysis into two categories, each answering a research question that I presented at the beginning of the thesis. The first section looks at how the pro-democracy activists in Myanmar perceive the current political climate, and the democratic government

that was in power before the coup. Thus, here I reflect upon their understanding of the democratic structure in the country.

7.1 Tatmadaw's Role in the Democratic System

In the previous decade, Myanmar underwent a transition from a military dictatorship to a quasi-civilian government system. As the constitution came into effect, and elections were held, a form of electoral democracy was established (Bünthe et al, 2019, 254)

According to Sørensen, in majority of the countries undergoing a transition towards a democracy, it leads to the creation of a Restricted Democracy (1998, 46). These are frail and unconsolidated system, where some institutions are established to enable a democratic system to function, however, major limits are placed upon the participation, competition and liberties of the individuals (ibid). The elite groups agree to this transition only on the condition that their interests are protected. When the military forces of the country are the elite faction, the elected civilian governments face the danger of coups if the military's interests are threatened in any way (ibid, 49).

Following a similar trajectory, Myanmar's transition to a democratic system reflected a restricted democracy, as the Tatmadaw cemented its influence through the Constitution. The State Law and Order Restoration Council, began to draft the constitution in 1988, for the transition. Yet it was only in 2008 in May, that it was adopted in the country. And it took three more years till it came into effect in January 2011 (Kyaw, 2019, 310). Despite the long process, the constitutional draft fell short in various respects. It did not meet the aspirations of ethnic minorities or the NLD party, however it consolidated military's privilege (ibid, 324). For instance, in the Basic Principles, Article 20 (f) the Defence Services are granted the responsibility of safeguarding the Constitution (2008, 6). Within the Legislature, in both the houses of the bicameral parliament, they have 25 percent of the total seats reserved for their representatives (ibid, 2008, 39; 52). Thus, the Tatmadaw entrenched its influence in the Constitution, and when it felt those interests threatened on losing the 2020 elections, it staged a coup to retain its influence in the country (Ward, 2021).

7.1.1 Findings

Within my interviews, the respondents acknowledged the military's role and continued influence over the previous five years of democratic transition. They asserted that the Tatmadaw hampered the consolidation of democracy in the country. They believed that military staged the coup to retain their influence in the country, which was threatened with the democratization process. Participant 10, who is actively involved in organising various strikes and flash mobs for the pro-democracy protest, drove home this point very clearly. She explained,

“Military is always crazy about power, and this current commander-in-chief, he needs to retire.... And military, you know, the dictatorship, they never want to leave the position and power, because it is the most important thing to them. And with the power, they are abusing the country economic system... economic institutions are not good, political institutions are not good, but there are one group of people who always get benefits out of those institutions. And they are the military, and its related family. So, as long as they hold the power, and abuse this economic and political system. You know, they can live very comfortably.”

-Participant 10

According to Participant 9, who belongs to the Zomi minority, Tatmadaw's actions reflected a quest for power, and he equated their presence in politics as a means to strengthen their influence and power.

“I think for them its just about power, because power give them a lots superior, to the citizens or superior to anybody. When they have that, what power in terms of money or in terms of power, in terms of anything lets say. Before then, before this 10 years of democracy, their words have been lots more powerful than rules in our country. So, if we know one of the leaders then, you are, like your business will be easier. That's it, everyone have to obey them or everyone have to look up to them for any decision we make for our business or any power. So maybe that is, one of the tempting things for them to do, to coup.”

-Participant 9

One of my respondents, Participant 8, had studied Political Science for his masters', and is currently based in Germany. He was an expert participant for me within my sample, as he had undertaken democracy research in Myanmar, and worked with the international election monitoring agencies in 2020. As per his insight, the democratic system in Myanmar was lacking because of the military's continued presence in politics, and stated that it was necessary that constitutional changes were made to consolidate democracy. He replied,

“There can be some concessions between further consolidation of democracy, which essentially means military stepping out of the politics and some concessions from a meaningful transitional justice. Which in effect, was never implemented, in the last 10 years.”

-Participant 8

He further explained the challenge in amending the constitution.

“If you look back at the last five years, there have been parliamentary attempts, dominated by the NLD. Its attempts to push away the military from the politics, but, if you know a constitution to a sensible degree, and Myanmar politics, it is so obvious that it is impossible, to try from inside the parliament....It was not specifically described in the constitution, but, if we imagine, if the coup never happened, it is what we would be witnessing today. A power-sharing regime between the NLD and the military, with the ethnic minority groups or political parties or armed organizations still being marginalized.”

-Participant 8

7.1.2 Results

Thus, my respondents view the military as a hegemonic actor in the country, that have grabbed power for personal benefit. This pursuit of power within Myanmar, and the military’s continued role in politics, created limits on the democratic system of the country, preventing Myanmar from achieving a full democracy. There is no representation in such a system, as the military does not consult the people, and the citizens do not wield the power.

The reason for military’s quest for power, was associated in economic terms, and my respondents held the view that the military was abusing its position and influence for maximum capital benefit. Therefore, for them, a democratic structure is hampered by the presence of military in politics, and the concentration of power, especially economic power, among the Tatmadaw. For the respondents, this absence of representation was a telling feature of an undemocratic rule.

7.2 Support for the Democratic System Under NLD

During the democratic stint in Myanmar, the NLD, under the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, was the ruling party. It enjoyed immense popularity and support, especially from the Bamar

Buddhist majority in the country. The understanding of democracy, and the perception of a democratic system among my sample, stemmed largely from their lived experience during the NLD's rule.

Hence, the democratic system in Myanmar was perceived as the system set up by the NLD, and the reforms that they implemented. They associated democracy as a system to benefit the people, and NLD, for them, was a party that favoured people. Thus, a democratic government for them, reflecting Lincoln's (1863) immortalized words, was "a government for the people".

In Myanmar, democracy is also closely associated to Aung San Suu Kyi and her fight against the Tatmadaw's stronghold. Rising to prominence with the 1988 revolt, she soon rose to become a symbol of democracy in Myanmar. She formed, and lead the NLD to its victory in elections, and ushered considerable reforms in education, healthcare and infrastructure, predominantly focussing on welfare of the citizens (Egreteau and Mangan, 2017, 19). As she advocated for democracy, her personal struggle to end military rule and bring freedom to the people became the image of democracy and democratic governance in Myanmar (Myint-U, 2019, 66). Within my interviews as well, even the non-Bamar, minority population acknowledged the contribution of NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi in the country, equating their efforts to benefit the citizens, as the democratic process.

7.2.1 Findings

Among the Bamar Buddhist respondents, the support for NLD, embodying a democratic system, was especially high. Participant 1 and 3 both identify as belonging to the Bamar majority, and they expressed unequivocal support for NLD. Participant 1 stated,

"So this is the government who brings us the true democracy. And then, even within a decade, 10 years, half of the period, like 5 years, is by the military government. So, we just know the taste of the democracy. We just started to see that. And then, every, we just know what's happening around the world. And then, taking back to the dark ages. So, this is, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the party is just like, bringing the light to us."

She associated a democratic system as one that benefits people. She elaborated that,

"I don't have any private justifications to know this is the only government that should have, I don't have that kind of things. Any government who can give us the ultimate benefit to the people, I would choose for them. And that's the NLD gov."

-Participant 1

Participant 3 also expressed similar thoughts when he said,

“NLD is the best party. She’s (Aung San Suu Kyi) the best role model for us, she’s very brave. Yeah, she’s brave, she bravely faced everything, she faced everything with smile. Now she’s always smile. She’s the best democracy hero for us. She values the people, she loves her country, and she wants Myanmar to develop, I believe her party always wins.”

-Participant 3

Even for Participant 9, who did not support NLD, he acknowledged their efforts over the previous five years of their rule.

“They are, for me, I am not a, firstly, I am not this NLD party supporter, but they are majority, they won majority seats. And they do whatever they can, in their head. So past five years have been, a lot of improvement all over the country, and even in the Chin state, the northern state, there are lots of improvement, infrastructure and in education, we can see some measurement...So under their rule, there are some necessary, there are some room to improve, of course, I accept, but, overall I think they have done really well.”

-Participant 9

For Participant 11, his support for NLD was rooted in Aung San Suu Kyi’s leadership entirely. He explicitly mentioned it, saying,

“Actually, it isn’t about NLD government, it is about Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. We voted for NLD because she was the leader of that party. And, and we believe that, we know that she’s not, she maybe not perfect, but she’s the best one in the country right now. And she has sacrificed her life, most of her life, in prison, for the country. And, and then, so we believe in her, we trust her. So, the main reason we believe in NLD government is because Daw Aung San Suu Kyi is the one, who is leading.”

-Participant 11

Thus, although they had differing views on the influence of Aung San Suu Kyi, the symbol that she was in the protest, and the role of NLD in ushering a democratic system in the country, was acknowledged by my participants.

Participant 8 however, was a little sceptical of NLD, and did not believe that they truly consolidated democracy in the country. For him, more than establishing a democratic structure,

the NLD, and Aung San Suu Kyi, employed the symbol of democracy in the country. According to him,

“And the NLD supportership was revolving around the image of Aung San Suu Kyi. And its symbolism, and its claim to representing democracy, and somehow, means became ends, and people just supported the NLD... It is the NLD and the democratic champions, who are responsible to profess people about democracy.”

“Because, like, apart from, saying about democracy again and again, the NLD didn't really have any program or a concise, a shared definition of democracy. Not even among its membership.”

-Participant 8

7.2.2 Results

My interview respondents were largely consistent in their support for the NLD party, envisioning their efforts for citizen development and civil liberties as the embodiment of a democratic structure. Aung San Suu Kyi was a symbol of democracy for them, even though the meaning of democracy, and the party agenda to achieve it were not specified. Only one of my participants, Participant 8, noted that the NLD lacked a clear agenda on democracy and that the people identified it with the leadership of Aung San Suu Kyi, and the removal of military from politics.

However, as the NLD was democratically elected, it embodied a representative system. It was also accountable to the citizens, which create a sense of inclusion. Thus, for my respondents, who felt that they received benefits from a representative and inclusive government, democratic system was one where these aspects were embodied in the structure.

7.3 Aspirations for a Better Quality of Life

With the NLD government coming to power, the economic policy of Myanmar began leaning towards social welfare (WB, 2022). Under their leadership, the biggest share of the budget was allocated to Planning and Finance Ministry, and the Electricity and Energy Ministry, with the Defence Ministry ranking only third. Spending on education was reported to have increased sixfold, and healthcare observed thirteen times higher expenditure in comparison to the allocation under the Tatmadaw (Lwin, 2019). Although a third of the population was vulnerable to falling below the poverty line in 2018, the poverty rates in Myanmar had halved, from 48.2 percent in 2005 to 24.8 percent in 2017 (WB, 2019).

As per the report by Central Statistical Organization, in collaboration with the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (2018), these policy measures and the focus on social development had an observable impact on the quality of life in Myanmar. Within my interviews, my respondents mentioned this improvement under the NLD leadership, and expressed appreciation for this development.

7.3.1 Findings

One of my respondents, Participant 11, is a doctor, and he observed the improvement in healthcare sector in Myanmar during the democratically elected government to be significant.

“Before the coup, you know there are many weak areas and there are many areas we need to improve. They are definitely, but, we have been seeing improvement, major improvements in recent years. Especially healthcare sector. You can, do some research in the internet, the amount of budget Myanmar has been using on healthcare has been dramatically increased. Our democratically elected government, because, before that, most of the fund were used in military, and for the weapons, and many stuff like that. And after the democracy, democratically elected government, there have been major influence in the healthcare sector.”

– Participant 11

Participant 9 comes from Chin state, and belongs to the Zomi tribe, which is an ethnic minority in the country. His take on improvement was also positive, especially in the context of the benefits that the minorities received. He said,

“So past five years have been, a lot of improvement all over the country, and even in the Chin state, the northern state, there are lots of improvement, infrastructure and in education, we can see some measurement. ...Okay, let me say, like, well I said, infrastructure that I say, even in the northern part of our Chins state, infrastructure have been much more improved. ...And, and some of the education reformation, like education, were most, becoming more practical in terms of teaching odds, or in terms of like, teacher-student ratio and all, they are building up, we can see clearly. ...Under that NLD there could be, like, majority usually get the right benefit, that is normal in any country. ...If the majority get good amount of some, some benefit, then the minority also, usually get a share, they have to get. I think, within 5 years, they have lots of challenges too. But, they did well, I should say, within 5 to, 5 to 10 years, especially 5 years of NLD rule, they did really well.”

– Participant 9

This response was noteworthy, since M stated that he was not an NLD supporter. Belonging to one of the persecuted minorities in Myanmar (MRG, 2017), his response does not stem out of loyalty to the NLD party or to Aung San Suu Kyi, but from his lived experience.

Even Participant 5 reflected this sentiment, as she stated her reasons to fight against the coup,

“And 2015 to 20, the difference is, let’s say we have internet, very cheap. We have internet cheap and internet also very good, so we can communicate to the whole world....And then, the school, the education also become very good. The NLD, the leader, we will say the leader of Myanmar, they open the school, you know, with free....And then, they also build that infrastructure, they need to do the road. and then they try to, cut the, corruption, you know corruption. They have to fight the corruption because the, we had been in Myanmar, there’s a lot of corruption in the government.”

“So, that’s why, this 2021 February revolution, if we don’t win, we have to suffer for the next 10 years, or whatever years. So, under this military coup, military junta.”

-Participant 5

Growing up in a military dictatorship, the improvement in the quality of life, brought forth by the democratically elected government, was a striking change from the earlier system. With the coup, the system reverted back to its authoritarian structure and oppression of the people, leading to the deterioration of the quality of life (Nachemson and Fishbein, 2022). In addition to that, the military created an atmosphere of fear in Myanmar. My respondents associated democracy with an absence of fear and freedom of expression to voice their opinions. They showcased a strong desire for an increase in personal freedom, which they felt was heavily curtailed under the Tatmadaw’s regime. Participant 7 noted her experience as,

“The military means everything bad... And when they rule, like will be, like nothing, no consideration to ordinary people. We all live in more hardships like they don’t think about people, they always think about themselves. And I went through that dictatorship, like as a child, I lived through the dark ages, literally and metaphorically... And during the last five years everything opened up and, everything was so different.”

“And like, I remember living in fear all the time, during the dictatorship. Like when you see uniform, you were just afraid. And that changed, last year, disappeared in the last 5 years. But, it came back, with this coup.”

-Participant 7

Participant 1 also elaborated upon this fear that the Tatmadaw incited among people, through her personal experience.

“And the psychologically impact, for example, my father, he has been once, in the department of the environment... So he is really, he is now into the mold of system, following the instructions. Now he dare not talk to me, with, more than 3 minutes. He thought that, if we talk each other more than 3 minutes, we have been hacked or tracked by the government. Sometimes, this is the fear, that makes the people think more than, beyond, to reach their reality. So its, I mean, it’s a kind of in a way of violation of human rights.”

-Participant 1

Participant 5 also iterated similar thoughts when she said,

“But this, the military junta, they always say that, they are the one who win, because they have gun, so, people afraid of gun, we don’t want to die. So, that time our, parents, or aunties or whoever, they don’t fight until the end. So, this generation, we have to fight again.”

-Participant 5

For her, the democratic system was closely associated with the absence of fear, and improved political liberties in the daily life.

“I like democracy. This 5 years is very happy and good for me because we feel safe. But these past 5 years we are not 100 percent democracy. We only get 75 percent democracy. But even 75 percent democracy give us a lot of happiness, a lot of strength, a lot of safe. A lot of, we get our right.”

-Participant 5

7.3.2 Results

Hence, one of the key takeaways from the interviews was the aspiration of the respondents for a better life, which had been destroyed by the Tatmadaw. The democratic regime had given them political liberties and freedoms. Unlike the atmosphere of fear during the military regime, the people were able to enjoy a degree of freedom and liberty, and express their opinions freely. Therefore, they perceived the democratic system as an open, liberal system of governance that gave them greater rights and freedoms. And they placed a significant importance on the relationship between a democratic system, and an improved quality of life.

Here, we come to the end of the first section within my analysis. From my interviews, I gained the insight that my respondents had, more the most part, a positive outlook towards the NLD government, and the democratic system in the country, that was established prior to the coup. They understood this system, as one that brought benefits to the people, through economic opportunities, social welfare and development in the country. They also experienced a higher degree of freedom in their daily lives. This improvement was observed across the ethnic minorities, as expressed through my respondents belonging from those communities. Thus, democratic system was a system that brought the citizens more rights and opportunities to improve their lives, and democracy was closely associated with the quality of life enjoyed by them.

Since it was also a system that had been established through elections, the sense of legitimacy of the system was reinforced by the idea that the NLD was representing the citizens of the country, and that they held the power, delegated to the party for the functioning of the country.

8. Interview Analysis: Part II

This section aims to answer my second research question, and present how the pro-democracy activists in Myanmar understand democracy as a concept and the ideas they associate with it.

As mentioned at the outset of this thesis, my research was undertaken with a very small sample. My attempt was to be as diverse as possible, and include members from various ethnic communities, to get a holistic idea of the way Burmese pro-democracy activists understand democracy, and the type of system they envision building. Myanmar has seen its share of ethnic and religious conflicts, and the minorities have faced discrimination and persecution repeatedly. Within a highly fragmented society, establishing a meaningful democracy, that assures rights to all communities, and protects the minorities from the tyranny of the majority, is not a cakewalk.

In my interviews, the respondents expressed a feeling of solidarity, as the various groups united against the Tatmadaw, which was their common enemy (Kean, 2022). Their understanding of democracy as a concept, stemmed from the pro-democracy protest and the solidarity that was brought forth by it.

8.1 Ethnic Diversity and Democracy

The military coup has prompted ethnic unity across the country, as the citizens are uniting against the Tatmadaw's oppression. Their resistance is being met with brutal force, regardless of ethnic or religious community they belong to. This has revealed to the majority about the plight of the minority groups that have been facing this indiscriminate oppression by the military. This has made the people more aware of discrimination and more accepting of each other, as military is now their common enemy (ibid).

One of the most surprising, yet heart-warming response I got regarding the ethnic conflict in Myanmar has been the readiness of the people to acknowledge that discrimination has existed, and apologising for it. With military-controlled media and widespread propaganda, many people were reluctant to believe that the Tatmadaw was violently oppressing minorities in the country. The mindset shift from that, to accepting their story and apologising for it, shows a big leap towards creating a more united, inclusive society.

8.1.1 Findings

This sentiment of solidarity was first articulated by Participant 1 when I interviewed her. She was my first respondent, and her answer was crucial in shaping how I approached this question in my next interviews. She said,

“Yeah, this again make us more united, and understanding, and through that I think this will find a common ground for all of us. Like I mentioned earlier before, we didn't know that there all lots of issues, that they have been marginalized, that majority didn't mean to. So, we didn't. For example, we only, we know that before marginalized. But we know that with the brain. We only felt that after the military coup. How they felt that, we just realized, with heart. We apologize to the minority people that we have been doing that. Atleast as a majority we have some responsibility to take care of them. We more realized that we have some responsible thing. Yeah, we felt guilty, at the same time, through that, I hope the best that we can find the common ground. How we can handle the things because a lot of diversity, a lot of perspective, to handle.”

-Participant 1

She then continued, regarding NLD and the minorities,

“I think that the NLD government take into account, especially they started to take into consideration the ethnic minority from different religions, so that is a good

thing because their voice needs to be heard, although its minority, its very important to build the national, yeah.”

-Participant 1

Participant 8 also reiterated this sentiment, focussing on how the NUG had used this momentum of unity for formalizing the protests.

“I mean, you cannot really imagine, military, firing, like live rounds in Yangon. But now it is possible, and people are united around that. And, it is really encouraging to people, to see people’s responses. They apologise, they apologized to Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, and they explicitly determined and committed. And the military make itself a common enemy. And the National Unity Government, the NUG, it has some weaknesses, but its somehow managed, to some extent, to harness these public sentiments. To forge a more formalized, and also, like, identify a shared identity, against the military.”

-Participant 8

Participant 5 attributed the ethnic tensions to military propaganda, and their divide and rule policy. She also stressed on the Tatmadaw’s tactic to create tensions among different religious groups. Her response was,

“That is the military time. And if we talk about the, religion also. If you are Buddhist you have more opportunity to become a general, and officer. If you are Muslim, you are Christian, you are Hindu, you don’t have that opportunity, okay. So, if you want to be a general, if you want to be, like one of the higher rank, you have to change your religion to Buddhist. So this is what’s happening. And if you’re Buddhist but your wife is Christian, then you cannot have that opportunity also. So that time is, military time, if we see about religion. And then they go and destroy some, like the cross, as I mentioned in the human right in Myanmar that time, if you remember. They also destroy the cross, and they replace with, the pagoda. So this is what happen. Actually, the, they want to do, you know, make the people hate each other. Say, if they come and do like that, the Christians will hate the Buddhist, you know something like that. But luckily now we all open our mind, our heart, our eyes, so, we don’t hate each other, we love each other now.”

-Participant 5

Participant 6 also expressed a similar thought, emphasising on the way the Tatmadaw had defined the ethnic groups in the country, and excluded some, which exacerbated this discrimination.

“Yeah, we absolutely, absolutely think that. Only democracy can, only with the democratic we can get this ethnic minority can get human rights, and other rights.”

In 1962 the military coup always happened in 1962, since then the ethnic minority, some ethnic minority has been, removed, by the military. At first we have 140 ethnicity, and then, we only 135 ethnicity, because the military removed them from the ethnic group.”

-Participant 6

Participant 7 also emphasised on this military propaganda, especially in relation to the Rohingya genocide. She expressed remorse from the majority for ignoring the indiscriminate violence faced by the minorities in Myanmar. Her response was also very insightful.

“Military, like now, they used excessive force to drive out all the people. Like what they’re doing now, burning villages, killing people at the spot. And those things, we actually, we were very naïve right. The majority of the people in Myanmar, because like we didn’t have any footages. Like what we have right now. We couldn’t believe like that military could actually kill massive number of people and burn the villages. Because we didn’t experience that in the cities, right. Only maybe ethnic minorities, but what they experience was like, many many years before the social media. So we had no, we hadn’t seen that. Yeah, we heard the story but we didn’t know. So that time when the Rohingya community was suffering, we couldn’t believe it, and then, we were thinking just international community and, they were dividing the communities and stuff, right. So nowadays, a lot of the people have realized this happened, a lot of us. That violence have happened to the Rohingyas communities and a lot of people have apologized for this, their negligence to their sufferings.”

-Participant 7

Speaking about his experience with military oppression, as he hails from an ethnic minority, Participant 9 also praised the unity that was being fostered in Myanmar against the military.

“After the coup, what I can say that because we are also working closely with CRPH, like, the elected form of CRPH so, I work closely with them, They, what they said is that, we had more of, we can feel what the, the oppression, I mean feeling, after the coup, because they have been also under the oppression, before them. They understand it but they just understand it, this time they feel and, and they have face it, about the oppression, so. Yeah, after the coup they understand more. Maybe hopefully in the future, they will be able to get that.”

-Participant 9

He also expressed hope for a more equal future as well, and in the NUG and the People’s Assembly, as they make efforts to be more inclusive.

“I think, lots of unities are there. I mean, because of the problem we are facing, because that’s as I say, like its, I mean amazing or wonderful, like strike that everyone involved... And, in spite of our differences, we can come up to, lots of

common goal, and all working together. Especially there, I can feel that a lots of mutual respect, form. Recently, in February I think, we had this People Assembly, and in that its seen is that, the panelists or the chairperson or anything was like, what I can see, there's lots of minority groups are involved in that. So I think, there are lots of like, mutual understanding were, are improving in this sense."

-Participant 9

Participant 7 also similarly responded with hope in NUG, for their inclusive structure. Combined with the sense of unity among the people, as they come together against their common enemy, the Tatmadaw, she was hopeful that it would result in an equal system in the future.

"So, NUG is more inclusive. So, I think a lot of people are very supportive, including the ethnic minorities....Ethnic minorities they are, they also feel more represented, and then, also for Myanmar ethnic minority, they also see that they are a lot more, choices we have. And a lot talented people who wanna work together. And a lot of the ethnic minorities are realizing, what ethnic communities have suffered, because of the military's taking control of their lands."

"So for me, I wanna say like, I hope that we will win and that NUG will come to power. And also like right now, even though a lot of bad things have happened to civilians on the ground, a lot of people now, we are seeing this immense sense of unity, among different, across different ethnic communities. And its like, you've never seen this before, this type of unity. And then a lot of people now, even the ethnic communities in the middle, central Myanmar, they witness the experience, how brutal this military is, so they are giving all in, into fight against them, and just trying to, uproot this evil. So I think like, a lot of people are so determined, to get rid of the military."

-Participant 7

8.1.2 Results

Therefore, when it came to the inclusion of ethnic groups and a united system for democracy, all my respondents were in favour of this diversity and representation. They considered the unity to be an important, driving force against the military coup, and they expressed the desire to promote this, to ensure a peaceful future. For them, unity and equal rights among all the minority groups was a precursor to establishing democracy. To that end, their support for NUG, the interim government, was based on its inclusive structure that promoted unity among the different groups in the country. Thus, they envisioned democracy to go together with equality. Participant 3's response perfectly sums it up.

"Democracy is an opportunity for ethnic nationalities, yes... So, we have a lot to do for democracy, I think, democracy is equal for all, democracy is equal for people"

8.2 Myanmar's Aspirations for a Federal Democracy

In Myanmar, the pro-democracy struggle has expressed aspiration for a federal structure. A National Unity Consultative Council [NUCC] has emerged, which is an alliance of the ethnic armed organizations, and pro-democracy supporters, to draft and ratify a federal charter. The National Unity Government [NUG], and the NUCC, along with leaders from various ethnic communities, have been united in their quest to topple the military regime and establish a federal democracy in its stead (Thanzin Aung, 2022, 3).

The Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw [CRPH], comprising of the elected representatives ousted by the military coup, established NUG as the interim government in Myanmar, and orchestrated the discussion on the federal charter, that would be acceptable across all ethnic groups in the country (ibid). The Federal Democratic Charter of Myanmar outlines Democracy, Self-Determination, Equality and Diversity, as well as Protection of Minority Rights among its Union Values (2021, 4). Within Chapter IV of the charter, it grants individual rights to all the people, regardless of their ethnicity, and grants citizenship to all who adopt it, regardless of their belonging to any ethnic nationality that was not a part of the Union of Myanmar before colonization (ibid, 6). Thus, the document firmly entrenches their desire for democracy with ethnic unity reinforced through equal rights.

Part II of this Charter, which outlines the Interim Constitutional Arrangement, discusses the establishment of a parliamentary democracy, with Region and State Hluttaw (Parliament) electing representatives from ethnic groups (ibid, 4). Within my sample, there was a high level of awareness of the fight for federal system in the country, and what such a system would entail. It reflected that the people in my research placed a huge importance on the ethnic diversity in the country, and the need to reconcile it with democracy, for a peaceful, sustainable solution.

8.1.1 Findings

Within my research, five of my respondents talked about federal democracy, of which Participant 9 and 11, both from ethnic minorities, stressed upon the need for a federal democratic system in light of the ethnic conflict. Being from disadvantaged groups in the country, they seemed to really support the idea of self-autonomy among the ethnic

communities. Others also expressed their support for this system. For instance, Participant 7 states,

“That’s what we feel, and then, we were thinking of having, forming a federal, federal country that would give everyone equal opportunities. And then, to, to govern, to have some sort of self-autonomy in different ethnic communities, yeah”.

– Participant 7

Although Participant 4’s response was vague, she also asserted support for this system.

“Yeah, and now, we not only fight, we are, we not only democracy, now its federal democracy. This is how Myanmar is going to fight, federal democracy”

– Participant 4

In comparison Participant 8, 9 and 11 had a deeper understanding of the concept of Federalism.

Participant 8 asserted why this was the way forward for Myanmar as,

“I think federalism is the only answer, I mean, only if compared, like a companion, complement democracy. Federalism can only be the answer for our country’s, sort of, chronic problems like civil war, ethnic disintegration, and resentment, decades long resentment of the ethnic minority groups towards the majority Bamaras”.

- Participant 8

Participant 9 connected it to the history of Myanmar, and with his ethnic identity. Against the backdrop of discrimination, and the desire for equal rights and opportunities, his support for federalism, and its understanding, was very insightful.

“That because, as you know, Myanmar is, when we get independent, we were different kingdom. Like for us, in the western Chin and in the northern Chin our tribe the Zomi we have our own rulers. At the same time in the northern,, they have the Shan, they have their own ruler they have their own king. Everyone, they have their own. So the British come, and the leaders, and they call it, this Burma or Myanmar. So it’s become like independent country. But, in between, the military have been like, they just take all the powers, despite of distributing the power to different group or different people. So, what, in this time, all demand is to get full federal democracy, the state are, and the people who have most of the power, and they share centre powers could be, in the, central government, that’s what we are demanding. ...Because, lets say, the central government have almost all the power before. Even in our states, in our own states, who should rule was given by the central government, okay, this should be your prime minister, I mean your minister for your state. So instead of that, what is that, we were write our own constitution for our states. As, we write our own constitution for our state, and, we, those who

should lead our people to follow this constitution, so we want that rights that's why federal".

"The, at the end of the day, our voice should be heard, by the government, that's what we want. So, in that system, why do we choose federal democracy is that, as I say, we have our own land or tribe have been ruling by ourselves, before, this independence and before the independence of, the British emperor took up. So, when they give independence, only we, were all formed together and central government have been formed after that. The military and all the dictatorship have been taking all the power to the centre, their rule. What we want is that, the distribution of power, back to the people is our main target".

-Participant 9

Participant 10 also articulated the need for federal democracy very cogently, stressing on the demands for it by the pro-democracy protestors, and the reason why the people were supporting it in Myanmar.

"They, we are fighting to get the justice, we are fighting to restore the democracy, and we are fighting to transform the country into a federal democratic country. Because we believe that federal democratic country is our solution and for the country to move forward. So it is not only about, taking down and rooting out the military dictatorship, it is about how we took out the military regime, and then, thinking about the rebuilding of the country, you know, in a different approach. Democracy is not enough for us".

-Participant 10

When I further asked her about federal democracy, she elaborated that,

"Right now, we have like, everything you look at, oh this is different ministry, different sector, everything is centralized. And then the revenue sharing is not so fair for some of the ethnic areas. And in Myanmar, geographically, ethnicity is so diverse. So, with the federal norms and federal constitution, people believe that it is better to manage their territories and come together as a nation and be more prosperous. Because, you know, for state, Karen people, Karen governance system know more about their people than the central government do. Some areas are, like so far away from the, you know, central government, that they don't really know what's going on. And they don't really know how to manage the natural resources over there, education system. You cannot just, you know, one solution for all, it doesn't work. And there are like, different ethnicities in one place. So yeah, federal, its what we aim for now".

-Participant 10

She also talked about the popularization of the idea after the military coup, as it came to the forefront and people began to engage with the concept.

“Yeah, you mean, not only people protest, people who involve in the revolutionary movement, some of them, since before, they are the advocate of federal democracy in the country. But the federal thing is not a very popular thing in the country, so not many people are aware about what are the values and why it is good for the country. But when the coup happened, people come into the realization that federal democracy would be the one. That is why, if we won the revolution, they are aiming for the federal democratic country rather than just a democratic country”.

-Participant 10

8.1.2 Results

Although my research focused on a limited sample, the idea that inclusion of all communities, and their representation to ensure everyone’s rights were protected, was clear among my participants. For them, deposing the military general and establishing a Federal Democratic system was their goal. The sample I interviewed aspired for a new system altogether, where they could start on a more equal footing. The support for the Federal Charter and NUG, and the promotion of ethnic communities in the government, reflected their intent for a more inclusive society. Their aspiration was to get rid of the military for a better life, and inclusion and representation of minorities did not seem to infringe upon their rights or cause any concern regarding power-sharing. What was of utmost importance, was a peaceful, stable nation, and for the, the respondents regarded unity as key.

8.3 Civil Liberties, Quality of Life and Democracy

As I have elucidated in the previous section, my sample of respondents associated democracy with an improvement in the quality of life, and increased opportunities. For them, the concept of democracy largely rested on a system that would benefit the people. The Tatmadaw is concerned with securing their personal interests, which has had negative repercussions on the citizens. The pro-democracy activists, therefore, perceive democracy to bring opportunities back to the people, keeping their interests in the forefront.

8.3.1 Findings

For my sample, democracy represented a system of governance that ensured human rights and gave them the opportunity to hold the government accountable, and through elections, dissent and free speech. For instance, Participant 11 has elaborated upon it as,

“I mean, I believe that, we need to have freedom of expressions, you know. For example, we believe that, the military coup is unacceptable. If we want, if the military generals want to control, if they want to be the government of the country, they need to be participated in election process, like fair and square. They can't use force to control the country. So, in order to express our beliefs, we need to, express our feelings, feelings of opposition, to this justice. We can't hear like, you know, like, they try to stop all kinds of things, for us to express our feelings... We cannot accept those kind of things. And then we should be the person, who we believe, who majority of the people believed, can be leader, country to better future leader, towards, towards the democracy. So we won't to be controlled by someone, by force. We want to participate in the election process.”

-Participant 11

Similarly, for Participant 5, democracy meant that the rights of the people were ensured.

“You know, so that's why, this time, the whole Burma, the whole people fight for our freedom, fight for our democracy, so fight for our rights...So, I have been grown up under military rule, so, at that time, just not as I mentioned before, we talked that this is enough for us, if they ask, if we have one will, maybe its not really nice but can be. Actually, we can eat nicer meal. We can have nicer clothes, if we have the fully democracy and fully right to get our own resource, natural resource, and anything.

-Participant 5

For Participant 4, her participation in the protest, and her fight for democracy was directly linked to improving the quality of life, and to increase the level of freedom that the citizens enjoyed. She stated that,

“In Myanmar from 1962 to 2021, the military coup had happened three times. Each time the country becomes poor and poor, it loses democracy and human rights. Thousands of people gave lives to end authoritarianism and get democracy. The Myanmar military insults its people ignoring that the sovereignty comes from its citizens. If I let it be I can imagine how badly damage our country is and how horrible our next generation will suffer. That's why I'm participating in the pro-democracy movement. And I expect the next government can restore democracy, human rights, and national reconciliation with ethnic groups.”

-Participant 4

8.3.2 Results

Thus, democracy as a concept, drew heavily on the assurance of a better quality of life, accompanied by high levels of political and civil liberties to the citizens. My respondents understood the idea of democracy as a system of ensuring equality and human rights to all.

With the wide ethnic and religious diversity in the country, the advocacy for a federal structure of democracy stemmed from the desire to increase autonomy of minority groups, which would bring peace from the ethnic conflicts in Myanmar. It would also ensure that everyone enjoyed equal rights and freedoms, and everyone was included, and represented. Thus, they envisioned a system where power was highly decentralized. For them, the question was not about sharing this power with various groups, but, ensuring that the military did not consolidate this power, and abuse it.

9. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to understand the perception of the democratic system, and the concept of democracy among the Burmese pro-democracy activists, in the aftermath of the coup. Corresponding with my aim, I framed two research questions, to gain this insight. Firstly, I wanted to analyse the perception of the democratic system in Myanmar, prior to the coup. Secondly, I delved into the understanding of democracy as a concept among the pro-democracy activists in the country. To that end, I conducted a qualitative, primary research, based on semi-structured interviews, and performed a thematic analysis of the data, to answer my questions. My sample of respondents, although small, was diverse and illuminating, and the answers I received helped me conceptualise the understanding of democracy among my participants.

The political culture, history, and lived experience of people inform their outlook on democracy, and that was the same for my research. My respondents understood the democratic system, as a system where they enjoyed greater liberties, better economic opportunities, and witnessed development in their quality of life, the availability of public resources, and an absence of fear, that is characteristic of the military rule. Thus, according to them, the NLD government had provided various benefits to the citizens, instead of simply capitalising on their self-interests. Although there were several shortcomings, it was a government of the people, and for them, thus embodying the core principle of democracy, that is, rule by the people.

Following this idea, their perception of democracy as a concept, was based on a decentralised system of power, where the people had the final say, and could voice their demands and needs freely. This decentralised system was associated with a federal democracy, to increase autonomy of minority groups, and give them a chance to participate in the political process

nationally, and have representation in the parliament. Thus, they associated the concept with inclusion and representation, two of the core tenets of democracy.

Myanmar, from 2015 to 2020, was an electoral democracy, yet, this system was fragile as the military consolidated its influence in the parliament. Subsequently, with the February 2021 coup, this democratic system was replaced by military dictatorship. Now, the people are fighting for a revolution, a Federal Democratic system, with a new constitution, that ensures equality, representation, and self-autonomy to the states within Myanmar. The success of this movement depends on a lot of factors. The first victory for this movement would be if the Tatmadaw concedes power to the democratically elected government, and agrees to step down. Yet, as of now, with the brutal oppression being met out on the pro-democracy activists, and the refusal of the military to negotiate with the protestors, it does not seem to be an easily achievable goal for Myanmar.

However, hypothetically, if it were to happen, the country will still face numerous challenges. Although a Federal Charter is already being drafted, it will need to gain consent across all the ethnic groups. Democratic institutions will have to be rebuilt, and the damage to the economy, brought forth by the pandemic, the military coup, and the ongoing destruction with the protest movement and its crackdown will make this transition a complex process.

Yet, the citizens are united and determined to win against the military. Their hope for a better future, and their solidarity with each other, as well as their persistent fight for democracy is like a light at the end of the tunnel. It remains to be seen if Myanmar will be a country that creates a positive example in this wave of autocratization and democratic backsliding. However, the research on the democracy protest, in a country of rich diversity, history, and a unique political culture, will nonetheless contribute significantly to the field.

Appendix

Interview Guide

1. How do you follow the current events in Myanmar?
2. a) What are your thoughts on the military rule?
b) What did you feel when you found out about the coup in Myanmar?
3. What do you think the general opinion of the people is towards the military?
4. What are your thoughts on Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD government?
5. a) What was the atmosphere in the country when NLD came to power?
b) What did the people feel about their coming to power?
6. a) How did your daily life change under the NLD?
b) What were the most prominent differences between the military government and NLD?
7. a) Who do you support to become the leader in Myanmar?
b) Who has the most support of the people in the country?
c) Do people from all ethnicities and religions support them?
8. a) How important is ethnicity and religion in Myanmar?
b) Are you a part of the minority?
9. Do all different communities get a chance to make their voice heard?
10. Do they get a chance to be a part of the government?
11. a) How did you see the representation of different ethnicities in Myanmar before the coup?
b) Has it changed now with the military regime?
12. a) What is the National Unity Government?
b) What are your thoughts on the NUG?
c) What do you think is the general perception of NUG in the country?
d) Do you think the NUG speaks for the minorities in the country too?
13. a) Do you think ethnic unity is important for Myanmar?
b) If yes, why? And to what extent should there be unity?
14. a) Do you think the ethnic and religious minorities in Myanmar are at a disadvantage?
b) If yes, Do you think that special provisions should be made for the minorities in the country to level out this disadvantage?

15. a) Do you support the pro-democracy movement in Myanmar?
b) If yes: Why do you support it?
16. a) What are the ideals of this movement?
b) What do you want to achieve through this movement?
17. a) What do you think democracy means?
b) What would democracy look like in Myanmar?
18. a) How do the people view democracy?
b) How do you think they understand it?
19. What do people want from a democracy?
20. Do you think ethnic and religious unity is important in a democracy?
21. a) What is the most important thing a democracy should achieve?
b) Do you think democracy should first look towards other social issues? Or should it all go hand in hand?
22. a) How important is unity for democracy?
b) How important is it for the people to achieve unity in a democratic Myanmar?
23. What problems do you see in Myanmar that you are hoping democracy would solve?
24. a) What future do you see for Myanmar?
b) Which type of government or system would you like to see established?

Participant Guide

| Name Code | Date of Interview | Gender | Ethnic and Religious Background |
|------------------|--------------------------|---------------|--|
| Participant 1 | October 13, 2021 | Female | Bamar Buddhist |
| Participant 2 | October 14, 2021 | Male | Bamar Buddhist |
| Participant 3 | November 2, 2021 | Male | Bamar Buddhist |
| Participant 4 | November 2, 2021 | Female | Buddhist |
| Participant 5 | November 2, 2021 | Female | Christian |
| Participant 6 | November 2, 2021 | Female | Buddhist |
| Participant 7 | January 9, 2022 | Female | Prefer not to say |
| Participant 8 | February 15, 2022 | Male | Bamar |
| Participant 9 | February 18, 2022 | Male | Zomi Christian |
| Participant 10 | February 24, 2022 | Female | Prefer not to say |
| Participant 11 | March 11, 2022 | Male | Buddhist |

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