

# Resisting the Return of Military Rule

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Coalition Building, Armed Struggle and Governance by  
Myanmar's Spring Revolution Movement



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Myanmar's Spring Revolution Movement

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UNIVERSITY OF  
GOTHENBURG

**SCHOOL OF GLOBAL STUDIES**

Doctoral Dissertation in Peace and Development Research  
School of Global Studies  
University of Gothenburg  
November 2024

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Cover layout: Kyungmee Kim

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Printing: Stema Specialtryck AB, Borås, 2024

ISBN: 978-91-8069-989-1 (Print)

ISBN: 978-91-8069-990-7 (PDF)

<http://hdl.handle.net/2077/83650>



*For my parents*



# Abstract

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Social movements are a powerful form of collective struggle for democratic change that often relies on nonviolence. When met with harsh repression protest movements can escalate to armed resistance, while movements may also create governance to replace authoritarian rule over civilian populations. What prompts movements to go beyond protests and how they develop different contention strategies remains, however, largely under-examined. Building on Contentious Politics and Social Movements studies, this thesis provides insights into these issues by tracing the key actors, turning points and processes in the development of Myanmar's Spring Revolution. This protest movement emerged after the 2021 military coup ousted the National League for Democracy (NLD) government, ending a decade-long democratic opening. Based primarily on extensive original interviews, the thesis includes four articles that analyze the formation of the movement's ethnically diverse coalition, its escalation to an armed uprising, and its establishment of a National Unity Government and local governance.

The thesis found the movement united new and established opposition actors across Myanmar, including the NLD and existing ethnic resistance organizations, by channeling widespread outrage and framing an inclusive collective identity around political ideas, experiences and civil society structures that developed during the opening. Brutal junta repression prompted the movement to strengthen coalition cooperation, legitimize armed resistance and mobilize resources across its networks for an uprising. The movement also created an important shared political space for coalition actors to establish governance systems, though negotiating a new government was challenging and governance developed mostly at regional level.

Overall, the thesis' insights contribute to theory on how a movement's socio-political context influences mobilization campaigns. As it argues that recent democratization supports the building of a broad movement with the resources to launch different strategies against the return of repression, which may include armed resistance. The thesis helps develop theory on movement escalation by showing how a diverse coalition can unite and combine resources to mount armed resistance, a trajectory that remains poorly understood as movements often fragment during escalation. The thesis also deepens our understanding of the establishment of authority and governance by armed resistance organizations, as it shows how a protest movement can drive such political developments and unite diverse resistance forces in an emergent form of statehood.

Key words: social movements, contentious politics, civil war, mobilization, escalation, statehood, coalition building, ethnic politics, Myanmar



# Contents

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List of articles.....	iii
List of acronyms.....	iv
Maps of Myanmar.....	v
Acknowledgements.....	ix
1. Introduction.....	1
1.1 Research problem.....	2
1.2 Research aim and questions.....	4
1.3 Main argument.....	4
1.4 Overview of contributions.....	5
1.5 Delimitations of the study.....	6
1.6 Structure of the cloak.....	6
2. Myanmar’s political history and Spring Revolution.....	9
2.1 Minority resistance, military rule, and pro-democracy struggle.....	9
2.2 Democratic opening.....	11
2.3 The Spring Revolution’s coalition, escalation, and governance.....	13
3. Theoretical framework.....	19
3.1 Building a movement: coalitions, framing, networks, repertoires.....	20
3.2 Escalation: Repression, framing, resource mobilization.....	21
3.3 Micro-level escalation: defending a collective identity.....	23
3.4 Negotiating statehood through a movement: governance, authority.....	24
3.5 Theoretical contributions.....	25
4. Methodology.....	27
4.1 Single case study design.....	27
4.2 Process-tracing method.....	28
4.3 Data collection.....	28
5. Ethical and methodological challenges.....	31
5.1 A military coup, and a Ph.D. project disrupted.....	31
5.2 Ethical and methodological challenges.....	32
5.3 Research ‘brokers’ and positionality.....	34
6. Summaries of the articles.....	35
7. Conclusion.....	41
7.1 Main findings.....	42
7.2 Contributions.....	45
7.3 Concluding argument and Myanmar’s future.....	47
7.4 Future research directions.....	48
References.....	51
Appendix 1 - List of interviews.....	61
Appendix 2 - Sample interview guide.....	65
Svensk sammanfattning.....	69



## List of articles

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- I. Vrieze, P. (2023). Joining the Spring Revolution or Charting Their Own Path? Ethnic Minority Strategies following the 2021 Myanmar Coup, *Asian Survey* 63(1), 90-120.
- II. Vrieze, P. (2024). Movement Escalation and Mobilization for Resistance: From Anti-coup Protest to ‘People’s War’ in Myanmar, *Political Geography*, 114, 103165.
- III. Vrieze, P. ‘Now 54 million People Want Revolution. Why Not Me?’ Micro-foundations of Movement Escalation to Armed Resistance in Myanmar (unpublished manuscript).
- IV. Vrieze, P. Negotiating Statehood through a Movement: Governance and Authority under Myanmar’s Resistance Coalition (unpublished manuscript).

# List of acronyms

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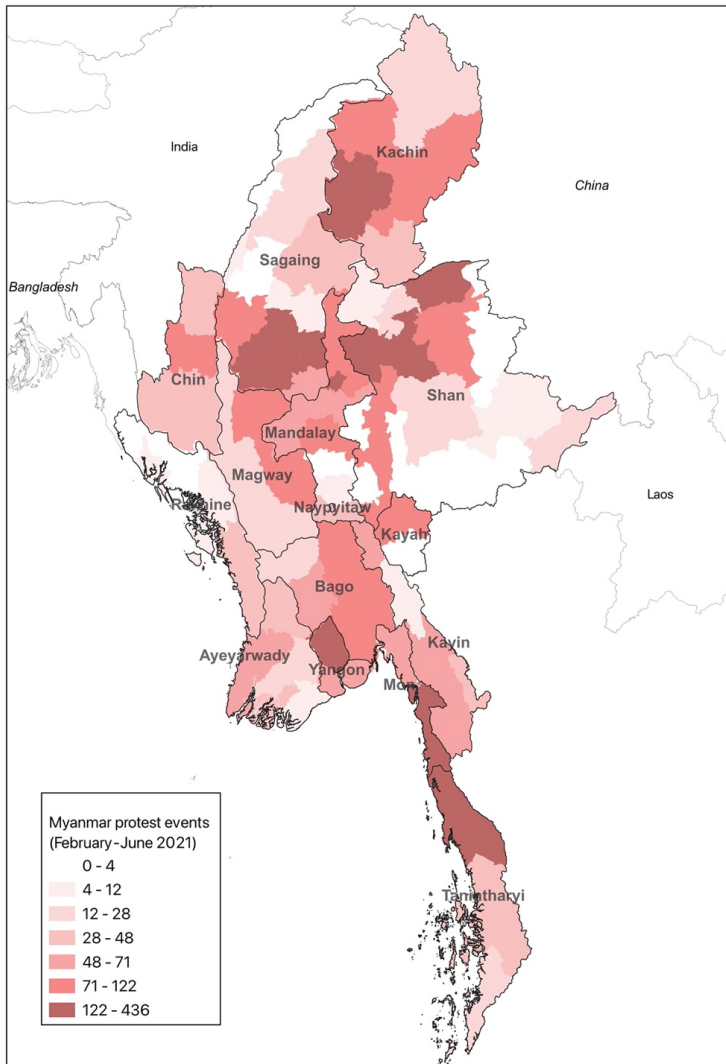
AA	Arakan Army
CDM	Civil Disobedience Movement
CNF	Chin National Front
CP	Contentious Politics
CRPH	Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw
ERO	Ethnic Resistance Organization
GSC-N	General Strike Committee of Nationalities
KIO	Kachin Independence Organization
KNPP	Karenni National Progressive Party
KNDF	Karenni Nationalities Defense Forces
KNU	Karen National Union
KSCC	Karenni State Consultative Council
MNDAA	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
NLD	National League for Democracy
NUCC	National Unity Consultative Council
NUG	National Unity Government
PDFs	People's Defense Forces
SAC	State Administration Council
SMT	Social Movement Theory
TNLA	Ta'ang National Liberation Army
USDP	Union Solidarity and Development Party
UWSA	United Wa State Army

# Maps of Myanmar

## 1. Myanmar's main administrative areas

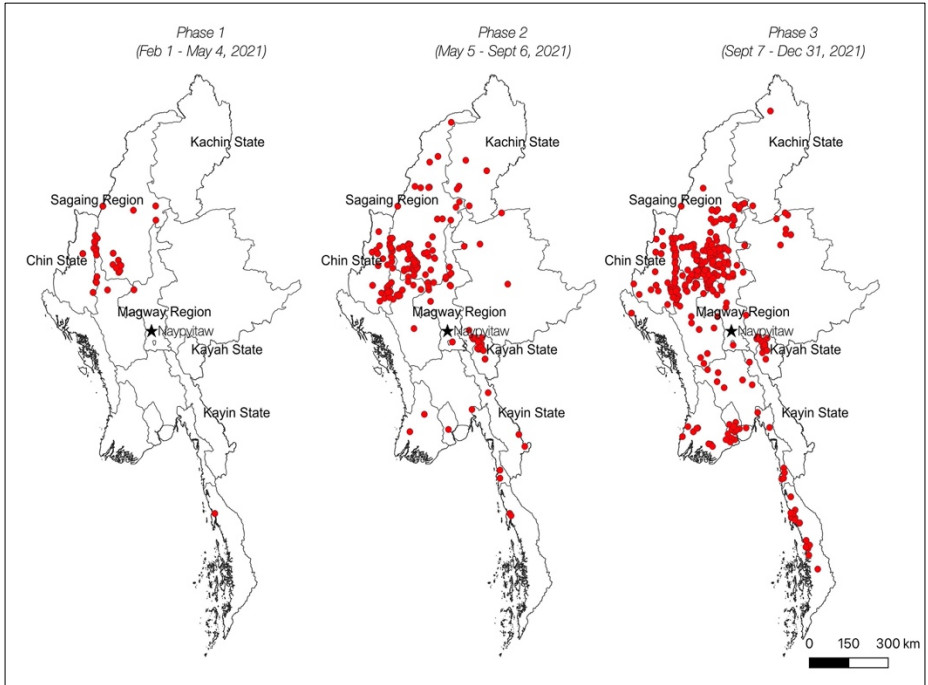


## 2. Myanmar movement's spring 2021 protest per township



Map based on data from ACLED 2023 (Image: Kyungmee Kim)

### 3. Diffusion of the Spring Revolution movement's escalation in 2021



Clashes between new armed movement groups and regime forces in 2021, excluding ethnic resistance organizations. Map based on data from ACLED 2023.

i Note these maps use official names for ethnic states whereas this study uses the pre-1989 spelling, e.g., Karen rather than Kayin, Karenni instead of Kayah, preferred by ethnic minorities.



# Acknowledgements

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The completion of this thesis is the culmination of both a journey and an extended period of learning, researching and writing, which has been highly enriching, exciting and at times challenging. I could not have done it without the strong support and encouragement of my family, friends and colleagues, many of whom I have met along the way. My journey started in 2012 when I moved to Myanmar as a journalist during its once-promising democratic opening. In 2018, I was glad to have the opportunity to pursue this Ph.D. project at the School of Global Studies, which continued my engagement with the country.

It was in Myanmar that I first got to know Kyungmee, my loving wife, who has been a constant source of support and encouragement during my academic work and in life ever since. Our daughters Daphne and Sylvie were born during my Ph.D. years and have filled us with love and joy. I hope they will skim through these pages one day to understand what kept papa so busy all that time. I also am very thankful to my mother Coba and Reinier for their strong support and continuous interest in my work. I also thank my sister Anne and Sander, and their family, as well as my parents-in-law Byungtae Kim and Jungsuk Lee, for their interest in my research over the years.

I am beholden to many people who have supported my development as an academic and helped me complete this thesis. Foremost, I wish to thank my supervisors Peter Johansson and Johan Karlsson Schaffer, who provided steadfast guidance along the Ph.D. track with clarity, encouragement and kindness. I am profoundly grateful for their insights which helped me understand the research and writing process, and for their patience as they dealt with procrastination and occasional confusion on my part. Moreover, I especially appreciate the advices they gave when my project met with several hurdles, not least the 2021 coup. Within weeks after that event, when I was already some two years into researching Myanmar's democratic opening, they quickly and wisely supported a switch in the research focus, encouraging me to seize the opportunity to research the historic protest movement that was emerging. Thank you so much, Peter and Johan!

Two people who I am also indebted for their invaluable help in my research on postcoup Myanmar are Sumlut Seng Li and Naw Seng. Their insights into their country's turbulent developments, their networks and persistence were crucial for my research, which they supported from their bases in Thailand. Their help often involved finding ways to contact hard-to-reach people inside the country, which they nonetheless always managed to pull off. I also had a great fieldtrip to the Thai-Myanmar border with Seng Li in late 2021, where I gained strong insights into the rapidly developing situation. While I can't mention names, I am deeply

obliged to all Myanmar interviewees who took the time, amid their tribulations, to help me understand why and how they are struggling to rid their beautiful country of military dictatorship. To give but one example of their patience and generosity: a Sagaing Region resistance fighter did not mind climbing a Banyan tree for better mobile internet reception and then remained some two hours in it to be able to speak with me.

I would also like to express my sincere thanks to many others who engaged with my research and provided important inputs for this thesis during the key Ph.D. milestones. Camilla Orjuella and Arne Wackenhut were my PM discussants, and Bart Klem and Richard Georgi provided feedback during the midterm. Arne and Bart were also kind enough to help me develop my arguments in Articles II and IV, respectively. I want to thank Kristian Stokke for acting as my mock opponent and defense committee member. His thoughtful feedback on my project and extensive knowledge of Myanmar have significantly strengthened this thesis. I am highly grateful to Isabell Schierenbeck for acting as my Third Reader and for her interest in my research, which goes back to when I first had an online interview for my Ph.D. position amid power outages and unstable internet in Yangon. I would also like to extend my profound thanks to my opponent Isabel Bramsen and committee member Elisabeth Olivius for their roles in my defense proceedings. I want to, furthermore, note the extensive support I received from Gustav Rudd and Gunilla Blomqvist Sköldbörg in completing the thesis and other Ph.D. matters along the way.

I also am thankful for the wonderful Ph.D. community at SGS, who have offered support and great company. In particular, I want to mention my Ph.D. cohorts Sara van der Hoeven, Alexandar Jung, Hassan Aden, Matteo de Donà, Dustin Johnson, Fisseha Fantahun Tefera, Nana Rask, Viktor Westerberg, Juanita Esguerra Rezk, Bizu Ashagrie, as well as Avyanthi Azis and Aly Verjee. I would like to send a special thanks to Pernilla Nordqvist for being a great Ph.D. colleague, with whom I could share an interest in Myanmar and discuss the challenges of researching the complex postcoup situation. I also had the pleasure of working with Pernilla and Anja Franck to organize some very interesting public discussions on Myanmar in the wake of the coup.

I also want to express my appreciation to the Swedish Institute of Foreign Affairs in Stockholm for welcoming me as an Associate Fellow in 2023. Especially, I thank Åsa Malmström Rognes, Nicholas Olczak and others at the Asia programme, as well as Mark Rhinhard, for taking an interest in and providing feedback on some of my work. I wish to thank the following grant funders for supporting my Ph.D. project: Göteborgs Handelskompanis Deposition, Lars Hierta Memorial Foundation, Helge Axison Johnson Foundation, and Stiftelsen

Karl Staaffs Fond, the GU Donation Board and the Adlerbertska stiftelserna.

As noted, this thesis in many ways caps a journey that started with some six years spent in Yangon. I was lucky to meet some fantastic friends there and journalist colleagues at *Myanmar Now* and *The Irrawaddy*, with whom I had great times and got to understand the country well. A big shout out goes to Andrew Kaspar, Simon Lewis, Feliz Solomon, Phil Heijmans and Bridget Di Certo, Sean Gleeson and Lucy Colette Stevens, Dene Hern-Chen, Joe Freeman and Poppy McPherson, Sean Bain, Steve Tickner, Jason Nelson, Lawi Weng, Cademon Saw (a.k.a. Closay), David Scott Mathieson, Yen Snaing, Natalie Matranga and Jon, Alec Scott and Dan Pye. I want to extend a particular thanks for their help at some points of my research to Kevin McLeod, Htet Naing Zaw, Htet Khung Linn, Zarny Win, and of course, Ko Swe Win (and please keep *Myanmar Now* going strong!).

In the Netherlands, I want to thank my longtime mates whose friendship over the years I cherish and who have always maintained a keen interest in my whereabouts and work. Big up to Michiel Laan, Ivo and Merijn van der Veer, Meindert Boelens, Wouter Bierma, Milan Vogelaar, Jelle Vlieger, Jeoffrey Smit and Martijn Klinkert. In Stockholm, I want to thank my great friends Frank Radosevich and Cajsja Collins, as well as the ‘Annedal crew’ and their families whom we have been glad to get know in recent years: Simon and Tania Mekonen, Bernardas Padegimas and Fifi Badat, Tomas Kullshage and Maja Negovanović, Sophia and Cornell Bailey, Max van Kjellman and Mayra Martinez. I also want to thank Martin Gemzell, Jenny Hedström and Kieve Saling, Kristina Jelmin and Alexander Jäätmaa for the fun get-togethers of the unofficial ‘Myanmar network’ in Stockholm.



# 1

## Introduction

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*There is a kind of acceptance and realization of what we need to do to address these long-term problems, and, at the same time, the current crisis is an opportunity where we can come together. We tend to have a common understanding, not that we have a common goal. Now we are kind of in the process of shaping the common goal.*

- General Strike Committee of Nationalities member, 21 September 2021

Resistance to authoritarian rule, or attempts to impose it, is one of the most significant struggles taking place in contemporary global politics (Tomini et al., 2023). A decades-long trend of democratization has been reversing in recent years amid a wave of autocratization, which has resulted in about as many democratic and autocratic regimes worldwide by 2022 (Boese et al., 2022; Wiebrecht et al., 2023). This trend concerns the gradual weakening of democracies, or a breakdown of democratic institutions, as well as a deepening of autocratic rule.

In response, resistance to autocratization has also been on the rise as a constellation of diverse actors has begun to resist in politics, state institutions and in civil society (Tomini et al., 2023). Notably, autocratic regression has occurred through an uptick in coups, which peaked in 2021, with five occurring in African countries (Mali, Tunisia, Chad, Sudan and Guinea) and one in Asia (Myanmar). These mostly military coups wiped out fragile democratic gains but prompted some of the highest levels of pro-democracy mobilization globally that year, as mass protests occurred in these countries in response (Boese et al., 2022).

This thesis examines such recent resistance against emboldened autocratic actors through a case study of Myanmar. There, the 2021 military coup ended a democratic opening and ousted the reelected National League for Democracy (NLD) government. Widespread public outrage over the coup brought together previously divided opposition actors from different levels and ethnic

backgrounds in a powerful movement called the Spring Revolution. Ousted NLD parliamentarians, ethnic minority resistance organizations and a range of civil society and protest networks forged a broad coalition, which deployed a variety of mass resistance strategies to great effect, including economic, symbolic and political resistance (Stokke & NN Kyaw, 2024).

The coalition actors agreed to try to replace the regime with a federal democracy and established a National Unity Government (NUG). However, a lethal junta crackdown on the protests escalated the movement. Protestors across Myanmar took up arms to form local “defense forces,” which cooperated with ethnic resistance organizations and the NUG to mount a widespread uprising. The movement’s resistance forces soon managed to push regime troops out of much of central and southern Myanmar and ethnic minority border areas, where resistance forces then began establishing local governance for communities (ACLEDA, 2023; Hein, 2022). By doing so, the movement’s diverse contention strategies reduced military control over the state, territory, and economic resources in a way that surpassed prior decades of political and armed struggles for democracy and minority rights in Myanmar.

This Ph.D. thesis analyzes the development of the Spring Revolution movement to understand how it drove such seismic political change and widespread resistance. The thesis does so through a segmented inquiry that entails four separate articles compiled within it. These articles focus on several key aspects of the movement’s development: coalition building, the escalation to armed tactics across the movement, microlevel mobilization for new resistance groups, and the movement’s efforts to establish governance and reshape the state. This ‘cloak’ section (or *kappa* in Swedish) first presents the overall Ph.D. research project and the overarching thesis framework that places the articles into a single focus.

### 1.1 Research problem

As noted at the outset, movement mobilization against a global trend of autocratization has been on the rise in recent years and points to a broad need to understand how such struggles to protect or advance democracy can unfold. Social movements have long been a powerful form of collective political struggle that engages large swathes of society. Movements can be understood as “a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action; are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks; share a distinct collective identity” (Della Porta & Diani, 2006, p. 20).

Protest campaigns have been movements' main contention strategy and researchers argue that in recent decades nonviolence has been the dominant and most effective strategy for movements to remove authoritarian governments (Chenoweth, 2021). The capacity of national protest movements to mobilize diverse political forces across society into a broad coalition for mass nonviolence has been extensively researched (Chenoweth, 2021; Chenoweth & Stephan, 2011; Pinckney, 2016; Thurber, 2019). The effectiveness of this strategy against autocrats was most recently demonstrated by protest movements in Sri Lanka in 2022 and Bangladesh in 2024 (Gleeson & Sajid, 2024; Gleeson & Vermaak, 2022). What prompts movements to go beyond protests and how they develop different contention strategies remains, however, largely under-examined. This thesis addresses this query by delving into the processes by which a protest movement can escalate to armed resistance and/or establish alternate governance systems to challenge a regime.

State repression can trigger changes in protest campaigns but what happens when a movement's powerful unifying and mobilizing processes are met with growing repression remains a subject of scholarly inquiry. This "punishment puzzle" concerns how we can understand repression's effects, which can vary from suppressing contention, to prompting intensifying nonviolence, or escalation to a violent, armed response (Chenoweth, 2021; Davenport, 2007). Protest movements that have escalated following repression to include an armed flank have recently become as common as strictly nonviolent movements, while a small percentage of nonviolence campaigns in recent decades have transformed into a full-blown armed uprising (Chenoweth, 2021, p. 151, 2023). The consequences of the latter contention dynamics can be far-reaching. As observed when repression prompted the escalation of the Arab Spring democracy movements in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. This eventually fragmented the movement coalition in each country into armed groups formed along ethnic and sectarian lines, which fought the regime and each other in civil war (Della Porta et al., 2018; Leenders, 2016).

How movements escalate to widespread conflict remains difficult to explain as the processes that drive the shift to a trajectory of armed tactics often vary by movement. The phenomenon of movement escalation thus merits further research (Florea, 2017; Tarrow, 2007; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Wood, 2015). Moreover, escalation is theorized to primarily result from internal movement divisions over tactical responses to repression, which lead a coalition to fragment as some actors abandon nonviolence and take up arms (Della Porta, 2018; Pearlman, 2011). Alternate trajectories of movement escalation, such as through coalition cooperation, remain poorly understood (Crenshaw, 2016, pp. 297–298).

Another contention strategy that remains relatively under-examined is the creation of governance and state institutions by movement actors to replace authoritarian rule over civilian populations. While a growing field of Civil War studies has focused on aspects of ‘rebel governance’ by armed groups, such inquiries have rarely examined the creation of governance by a broad coalition of movement forces (Pfeifer & Schwab, 2023, p. 11). This thesis seeks to address the query of how a nonviolent movement can escalate to resistance and develop governance by examining the Spring Revolution protest movement, which developed both contention strategies.

## 1.2 Research aim and questions

Through an in-depth case study, the thesis aims to explain *how the protest movement against the military regime in Myanmar turned to armed resistance and established governance*. In other words, the thesis provides an account of how the protest movement developed during an episode of contention and produced these political outcomes in Myanmar.<sup>1</sup> Constructing this account involves covering several themes that are central to social movement dynamics: the formation of a coalition with a collective identity and shared political goals, the emergence of new collective action strategies during interaction with the state, and the mobilization of participants and resources for collective action. My analysis of the Spring Revolution’s development is further guided by three research questions that involve these themes:

1. *How did the 2021 coup prompt established and new opposition actors to form a broad coalition to challenge the military’s rule?*
2. *What motivated and enabled opposition actors to escalate contention to armed struggle against the military’s repression?*
3. *How did the opposition actors mobilize and cooperate to establish governance?*

The thesis answers these questions by synthesizing the analyses and main findings of the four articles. The summaries of the articles follow in Chapter 6 and the complete articles are presented after the cloak.

## 1.3 Main argument

This thesis provides a comprehensive account of key developments in the Myanmar case that help explain how a democracy movement can escalate to

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the study’s approach to causal explanation in a single case study, see Methodology chapter, page 27.

armed resistance and establish governance. The thesis demonstrates the great capacity of protest movements to challenge authoritarian rule by creating an inclusive collective identity, a new political narrative, and democratic goals that unite coalition actors from an ethnically diverse society. A movement is especially resilient and capable of challenging regime repression if its mobilization campaign can build on identities, political practices and experiences, and civil society structures shaped by a recent period of political openness and democratization. Thus, democratization in an authoritarian context affords opportunities to build a broad movement coalition with extensive resources that can respond to repression with new contention strategies.

While this argument can shed light on the trajectory of various democracy movements, I focus on national movements that emerged in a country with pre-existing armed resistance groups, which can come under the movement's broad umbrella. When met with repression, such a broad coalition can increase cooperation across its networks for a popular uprising and for new forms of governance, rather than fragment and produce armed factions during escalation as often occurs.

## 1.4 Overview of contributions

The thesis provides insights into relatively understudied processes of a movement turning to arms and establishing governance, which contribute to the literatures on Contentious Politics, Social Movement Theory, Civil War, and State-Society Relations. The main argument broadly contributes to scholarly debates on democracy movements' trajectories by showing how a period of recent political openness can affect a mobilization campaign's response to state repression. The study offers a specific, novel finding as it sheds light on how a protest movement can unite to mount armed resistance, which is an escalation trajectory that remains poorly understood. The study also provides new insights into escalation by detailing how mainstream protestors can cooperate with pre-existing armed organizations to launch widespread resistance by a movement.

The thesis, furthermore, deepens our understanding of microlevel mobilization for high-risk collective action. As it shows that a strong identification with a movement's pluralistic collective identity and democratic goals moves individuals to protest and then come to the movement's defense through armed resistance when repression hits. Lastly, the thesis shows that a democracy movement can offer an important shared political space for a coalition of new and established opposition actors to establish governance under a new state structure. The Conclusion will elaborate on these

contributions and new insights.

## 1.5 Delimitations of the study

This thesis takes as its unit of analysis the ‘episode of contention’ by Myanmar’s movement that began in response to the 2021 coup (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). I examine the movement’s escalation and establishment of governance by focusing my analysis on the main coalition actors, key events and processes within the movement. These delimitations of the study imply that some aspects of the postcoup conflict are beyond my analytical focus, namely continued nonviolent contention, the role of political actors outside the movement, and the international context. I will briefly account for these aspects. The study captures only the movement’s initial protest campaign, but limited nonviolence continued to be a significant form of defiance following the March 2021 crackdown through symbolic acts, limited strikes, and boycotts targeting the junta’s interests. Moreover, while I describe how the crackdown influenced escalation dynamics, the study does not further examine the regime’s strategies and repressive measures against the movement.

The study provides an overview of ethnic minorities’ diverse initial responses to the coup and emergent movement (Article I), but it stops short of analyzing how some minority elites and ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) pursued their own resistance strategies outside of the movement coalition. Furthermore, these EROs developed important alternative governance systems that are beyond this analysis. Most significant in this regard is an alliance of established Rakhine, Ta’ang and Kokang EROs that did not challenge the regime until late 2023, when they launched an effective, surprise offensive against junta forces. Finally, as the movement is strongly driven by domestic dynamics and political actors, I have not focused on the influence of Myanmar diaspora networks and the international community on the movement, though I touch on these issues in the articles and Chapter 2 of the cloak.

## 1.6 Structure of the cloak

The remainder of the cloak contains six chapters. Chapter 2 provides a concise account of Myanmar’s political history since independence and its democratic opening, and then outlines the Spring Revolution’s coalition building, escalation and governance. Chapter 3 presents the theory and concepts that provide a framework for analyzing key movement processes. Chapter 4 covers the research methodology. Chapter 5 discusses how the study resolved the ethical and methodological challenges it encountered while researching

Myanmar's postcoup conflict. Chapter 6 provides a summary of the four articles and their findings, which are at the heart of the thesis. The Conclusion in Chapter 7 summarizes the research, synthesizes the thesis' main findings and knowledge contributions. It explains how these deepen our understanding of the phenomenon of a democracy movement that developed armed resistance and governance systems. After the cloak follows the complete articles, which contain research queries and rich empirical analysis of the processes of coalition building, escalation, and state-making by the Myanmar movement.



# 2

## Myanmar's political history and Spring Revolution

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Since Myanmar's independence from British colonial rule in 1948, its politics have been marked by long-running armed resistance by minorities, extended military regimes, and a popular pro-democracy struggle. The Spring Revolution represents a new phase of heightened contention for democracy and federalism, which fits with a pattern of "occasional but complex periods of free-fall and realignment" in Myanmar politics that have occurred since 1948 (Smith, 1999, p. 420). This chapter first outlines Myanmar's political actors, issues, and developments, including the democratic opening, up until the 2021 coup. Then, I briefly chart the Spring Revolution protest movement's coalition-building, escalation and governance, while I conclude with a short overview of the international community's responses to the conflict. In-depth empirical analyses of the development of the movement's coalition-building, escalation, and governance can be found in the articles.

### 2.1 Minority resistance, military rule, and pro-democracy struggle

Myanmar's population of approximately 54 million is ethnically diverse, comprising about 70 percent Burman majority and about 30 percent minorities (Egreteau, 2016). The Burmans live mostly in the central plains and river valleys, while minorities include dozens of groups of varying sizes that historically reside in the mountainous and rugged borderlands with China, Thailand and Laos to north and east, and India and Bangladesh to the west. Some of the largest minorities include, for example, the Shan, Karen, Kachin, Rakhine and Mon, Chin, Wa, and Rohingya.<sup>2</sup> Divisions between these groups

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<sup>2</sup> This study uses the country's current name Myanmar, rather than its pre-1989 name Burma, as this seems no longer controversial inside the country. It uses the pre-1989

## CHAPTER 2

predate colonialism and British rule deepened ethnic cleavages by favoring some minorities. This gave rise to a Burman-nationalist independence movement that viewed minorities as disloyal and the Burmans as the nation's natural leaders (Walton, 2013). The independent state was dominated by Burman leaders that favored a unitary state structure, which caused many minorities to form ethno-nationalist movements, some of which took up arms to demand political autonomy from 1949 onwards (Pedersen, 2008; Yawngwe, 2010). Myanmar's diverse society has thus long lacked a shared sense of state- and nationhood.

Following a short period of military rule in the late 1950s, the military seized long-term control in 1962, crushing all democratic opposition. The junta further marginalized minorities and forcibly imposed Burman Buddhist culture, while creating a state-building ideology around the idea of "National Races." This ethnicized citizenship structure excluded certain minorities such as Muslim, Hindu and Chinese groups as non-citizens, while placing Burmans at the top of the included nationalities (Cheesman, 2017; Houtman, 1999; Walton, 2013). Extended military rule also led to economic decline and a crumbling of one of Asia's most developed education and health care systems. While the country sank into poverty, corruption and cronyism enriched military elites and businessmen with links to the army.

A 1970s student-led protest movement against army rule was suppressed, but in 1988, students managed to launch a popular, pro-democracy uprising in central Myanmar and urban areas. This movement coalesced around the National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Aung San Suu Kyi, the daughter of slain independence hero Aung San, who rose to national leadership. During this time, the military experienced an internal coup that brought a new generation of generals to power. This junta cracked down on the movement but eventually conceded to democratic elections in 1990, which the NLD won, while ethnic parties also took a significant number of seats. However, the junta annulled the elections and two decades of repression followed.

Nonetheless, the brief opening was a political watershed, as it provided an opportunity for the formation of the NLD and ethnic parties, as well as a nascent civil society. It also set up two cleavages and main political actors in the opposition to the military: the NLD-led prodemocracy movement supported by the Burman mainstream and the ethno-nationalist movements with their armies, civil society and political parties based in minority borderlands (Stokke & Aung, 2019; Walton, 2013). These different opposition

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ethnic names, e.g., Karen rather than Kayin, as some minorities oppose the state's re-rendering of their names. The majority is designated as Burman.

actors developed a loose political alliance in the 1990s that called for a democratic, federal constitution, though they lacked a joint strategy and concrete agreement on a future vision for Myanmar. The junta, instead, launched a long process of drafting a constitution for a new political system that would enshrine its central position.

## 2.2 Democratic opening

After five decades of direct rule, the Myanmar military transferred power in 2010 to a civilian government formed by its parliamentary proxy of ex-army officers, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), which had been installed after flawed parliamentary elections. To the surprise of many observers, the USDP government initiated a democratic opening through sweeping political and economic reforms. Under the new political system, parliament opened up to the NLD, whose leader Aung San Suu Kyi had a vast base of support in the Burman-majority center of the country, and to ethnic parties, which catered to their constituent minority communities in border areas. Political prisoners were released, Aung San Suu Kyi entered parliament through by-elections, and media and civil society greatly expanded after restrictions on them were lifted. The economy and foreign investment boomed, easing strains on ordinary people, who could also afford newly arrived mobile internet (Egreteau, 2016).

The army enabled these reforms under a “hybrid” political regime based on the 2008 Constitution, which combines both authoritarian and democratic elements (Stokke & Aung, 2019). It allowed for multi-party elections for a civilian executive branch and national and region/state legislatures, but the military retained key powers through a range of provisions. For example, the military retained the power to appoint officers to 25 percent of parliament seats (giving it a veto over constitutional reforms) and sovereign authority over state security by controlling key cabinet posts. This effectively protected the military’s core ideological interests: maintaining the roles of safeguard of national security and the ultimate arbiter of political power (Bünthe et al., 2020; Egreteau, 2016). The charter also preserved the army’s vision of a strong unitary state, in which the central government holds extensive powers over the seven Burman-majority regions and the seven ethnic minority states, as well as over several “self-administered” areas for certain minorities located within ethnic states (see Map 1).

By this time, Myanmar’s conflict landscape included some 20 EROs which varied greatly in military strength, history, and geographical positions. These groups had only limited alliances and frequently competed at local level, which enabled the military to contain, though not crush, the resistance in the border

## CHAPTER 2

regions. The reformist USDP government launched talks for a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement among the groups, and eight EROs signed the accord in 2015 (Stokke et al., 2022; Thawngmung & Htoo, 2021). Myanmar's Southeast enjoyed relative peace and stability after the Karen National Union (KNU) signed a bilateral ceasefire in 2011 and later joined the nationwide accord. However, a longstanding ceasefire with the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO) broke down in 2011. Conflict with Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) and the ethnic Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA) in northeastern Myanmar, and with the Arakan Army (AA) in Rakhine State in the west worsened too (ISDP, 2018).

The United States and European Union governments widely praised the reforms and ceasefire talks, lifting decades-old sanctions and facilitating a massive influx of business investments and aid organizations into Myanmar. Its neighbors in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also welcomed the reforms and further strengthened relations. However, China grew wary of Myanmar's improving relationships with Western governments and their backing of the ceasefire process, while threats emerged to key Chinese investments as the reforms allowed for greater civil society resistance against the projects' heavy social and environmental impacts (Kim, 2024; Lintner, 2019; Sun, 2018). Beijing had been the regime's main diplomatic backer during its international isolation, while offering military hardware deals and investments in strategic economic development projects.<sup>3</sup> This includes a gas pipeline and railroad link from southern China to Myanmar ports and gas fields in the Bay of Bengal that allow Chinese energy and other supplies to bypass the Strait of Malacca, which is considered a vulnerable 'choke point' in case of conflict with the United States. China also wielded influence through its close relations with the powerful Rakhine, Ta'ang, Kokang EROs and United Wa State Army in northeastern and western Myanmar, some of which had belonged to the defunct Communist Party of Burma, which Beijing backed until 1989. These groups, which depend on cross-border access to southern China, proposed an alternative ceasefire process under Beijing's leadership.

In the 2015 vote, Myanmar held its first free general elections in decades were held, with 75 percent of parliament seats up for grabs. The NLD trounced the USDP and ethnic parties as much of the electorate—both Burman and minorities—saw Aung San Suu Kyi as the best candidate to challenge the military's political influence (Stokke, 2020, p. 20). The NLD assumed power, but ethnic minorities' hopes that their longstanding demands for peace and

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<sup>3</sup> Some experts argue that the military planned the democratic opening to rebalance its international relations and reduce its dependence on China (Lintner 2019).

greater political autonomy would now be heard turned to bitter disappointment. The NLD government centralized power with Aung San Suu Kyi and excluded ethnic parties, while often pursuing Burman-majority nationalist politics and maintaining a preference for a unitary state, much like the army before it (Zin, 2016; 2020).

The nationwide ceasefire process soon ground to a halt, hampered by the NLD's vision for a unitary state and tension between the NLD and army within the hybrid political structure (Bünthe, Köllner, and Roewer 2020, 250). As ethnic conflict worsened, the NLD government nonetheless gave public backing to the military's increased attacks on rebel groups in ethnic areas, where civilians suffered the impact. Most notoriously, the NLD shielded the army from international criticism during its 2017 genocidal violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority, which caused some 700,000 refugees to flee to Bangladesh (Zin, 2020).

Despite widespread discontent with the NLD government among ethnic minorities and public concern over the economic impact of its 2020 COVID-19 response, Aung San Suu Kyi's towering popularity and the NLD's savvy social media's campaign strategy paid off dividends during the November 8, 2020 elections (Lwin, 2020). The NLD won the vote—with a record voter turnout and surpassing its 2015 landslide—by taking some 80 percent of all contested seats in national and state/region parliaments.<sup>4</sup> The USDP and ethnic political parties won only a small number of seats, except in a few state-level assemblies.

## 2.3 The Spring Revolution's coalition, escalation, and governance

On the day of the new parliament's opening, February 1, 2021, the military abruptly closed Myanmar's democratic opening by violently ending the power-sharing arrangement with the elected government. It detained the NLD cabinet, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, many lawmakers and most of the party's Central Executive Committee. At the same time, internet shutdowns and army operations began, including the arrest of dozens of outspoken

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<sup>4</sup> The NLD won 396 of the 476 contested seats in the bicameral parliament, with the USDP and ethnic parties totaling 41 and 46 seats, respectively (Lwin, 2020). The NLD won a majority in legislatures of seven central regions and in Kachin, Karen, Mon and Chin states, but not in the Karenni, Rakhine and Shan state legislatures. Voting was cancelled in 16 constituencies in ethnic areas due to security risks, which was among a number of NLD actions ahead of the polls that angered ethnic parties. They also complained of structural disadvantages in Myanmar's first-past-the-post election system. See also Transnational Institute (2020).

## CHAPTER 2

community leaders, intellectuals and activists. A new junta, the State Administration Council (SAC), was established, which imposed a State of Emergency and promised new elections in the near future. The military claimed it intervened because the NLD had allegedly influenced the election commission to overlook some 10.5 million irregularities on voter lists in the 2020 elections, allowing the count of ineligible votes. But international observers had deemed the vote clean (Callahan, 2021).

Analyses of the surprise coup, while lacking conclusive evidence, have put forward several core motivations for the generals' actions (Barany, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2021a, pp. 5–6; Thawngmung & Noah, 2021). Many observers think the army underestimated how much Aung San Suu Kyi would dominate the remaining electoral space within the hybrid political system, while there were growing difficulties in power-sharing in the system and intense personal animosity between Aung San Suu Kyi and Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing. The NLD government had also actively tried to circumvent or change laws and constitutional procedures that limited its powers, while in parliament the NLD had tried in vain to enact constitutional amendments to reduce the army's powers (San Yamin Aung, 2020). Gen. Min Aung Hlaing had, furthermore, openly spoken of his presidential ambitions, but the USDP's 2020 defeat meant he faced mandatory retirement in June 2021.

Within days after the coup, the public began expressing their outrage by holding massive street protests, while a large-scale Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) among civil servants began to undermine the junta's authority and control of the government. The movement called for a general strike, a public boycott on taxes, electricity payments and products of military-owned businesses. The strikes caused government services such as education and healthcare to collapse, while crippling the economy (Andrews, 2021). The coup triggered a groundswell of public anger and solidarity across Myanmar's divided society (Jordt et al., 2021) (see Map II for nationwide spread of protests).

The outrage provided an opportunity for civil society organizations to foster an inclusive anti-coup movement, comprising NLD supporters, ethnic minority civil society, and national or Burman-majority civil society, such as student unions, labor unions and LGBTQ rights groups, and many other groups (Jordt et al., 2021). Notably, the movement also managed to mobilize Myanmar's extensive diaspora networks, which would provide a strong source of (crowd)funding, international advocacy and other support for continued resistance (International Crisis Group, 2022). Soon, the movement's demands went beyond opposing the coup and called for the establishment of a federal

democracy that would also meet minorities' political aspirations, while progressive civil society and younger protestors called for an end to discrimination based on gender, religion, ethnicity, and sexuality.

In early February 2021, 17 NLD and several ethnic party lawmakers-elect who had evaded arrest organized into a new political body, the Committee Representing *Pyidaungsu Hluttaw* (Burmese for national parliament), which could lead the NLD after the coup. The CRPH soon cooperated with the movement to combine its political legitimacy with the movement's organizational strength and inclusive reach, forming a powerful resistance coalition. The CRPH went along with the movement leaders' strategy to build a broad national alliance with ethnic civil society and EROs. Groups from Karen, Kachin, Chin and Karenni minorities joined the negotiations, and they agreed on the Federal Democratic Charter, which outlined principles for a future constitution and a framework for a National Unity Government (NUG).

The NUG cabinet was dominated by the CRPH/NLD but included several key minister posts and many junior positions for Karen, Kachin, Chin and Karenni, as well as Mon and Ta'ang minority representatives (Myanmar Now, 2021a). A Rohingya leader was made NUG advisor and later appointed deputy minister (Liu, 2021). The NUG cabinet represented an unprecedented level of cooperation among the ethnically diverse opposition, which had been unthinkable just a few months earlier under the NLD government. Despite strong public support for the coalition, Rakhine, Ta'ang, Kokang, Shan and Wa EROs, as well as political elites among other minorities, declined to join the movement coalition. These actors pursued their own resistance strategies and political interests without directly confronting the regime.

By March 2021, the junta's brutal repressive responses precipitated a shift in the movement toward a mix of non-violent and violent resistance. Initially, the army had tried to suppress dissent through mass arrests, non-lethal violence, and internet shutdowns, but it soon turned to indiscriminate deadly violence against protestors across Myanmar, killing hundreds of protestors within a few weeks' time. A tipping point came on March 27, when at least 158 protestors, including seven children, were shot dead by security forces nationwide (Frontier Myanmar, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2021b, pp. 5–8).

Enraged and threatened, groups of young protestors in Burman areas of central Myanmar, as well as in Karenni and Chin states, turned to improvised self-defense and often used home-made rifles (known as *Tumi* guns). After fierce street battles, these groups went to the nearest EROs for basic military training and arms to form proper, local resistance groups. The junta violence

prompted many movement activists to publicly call for armed struggle together with EROs to defend Burman and ethnic communities that were protesting, and to remove the military from politics once and for all. Meanwhile, direct confrontations also intensified between junta forces and EROs that cooperated with the movement and sheltered the resistance (McPherson, 2021; McPherson & Wongcha-um, 2021).

Numerous new resistance groups then began to emerge in both ethnic border areas and central Burman areas, the latter of which had seen no conflict for decades. Highly motivated and locally supported, these groups used limited weapons and improvised explosive devices to inflict serious losses on the army (Myanmar Now, 2021b). Recognizing the resistance's relative effectiveness and public support, the NUG launched a strategy for armed revolution in May 2021. The NUG encouraged proliferation of the resistance while it tried to assert command over the groups, which it dubbed "People's Defense Forces" (PDFs). On September 9, 2021, the NUG declared an all-out 'People's Defensive War' by new resistance and EROs against the junta (Myanmar Now, 2021c).

The army quickly lost control of rural areas across Myanmar as an estimated 65,000 new resistance fighters eventually revolted and cooperated with Karen, Kachin, Karenni and Chin EROs, whose combined forces were estimated to number 30,000 (Hein, 2022) (see Map III for geographical diffusion of movement escalation).<sup>5</sup> The military responded with heavy aerial attacks and a counterinsurgency approach that indiscriminately killed civilians and destroyed homes and properties in communities suspected of aiding the movement's resistance. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were displaced by conflict in Burman and ethnic areas throughout 2021, and by late 2023 this number had risen to some 2.5 million people (UNOCHA, 2023).

The NUG strategies for contesting the junta's power also included a claim to legitimate state authority based on the NLD's election mandate and its broad coalition. It set up a fledgling state administration to govern and provide services to the population, which have broadly supported its state authority (Jap & Liu, 2024). Though largely based in ERO areas or in exile, the NUG cabinet developed 17 ministries that attracted hundreds of striking civil servants (Progressive Voice Myanmar, 2023). However, the NUG could not develop into an effective, central political and administrative body, as the coalition could not agree on a comprehensive interim federal state structure to

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<sup>5</sup> Past estimates put the Myanmar Army's strength at 300,000–350,000 soldiers, but some experts argue battlefield losses, defections and recruitment problems are likely to have halved its current numbers (Hein, 2023). The nationwide number of ERO forces, estimated prior to the coup, was at some 80,000 troops (Selth, 2015).

clarify power-sharing among coalition actors at the central state and sub-national region/state levels.

Consequently, power and governing authority remain dispersed within the movement, leading the NLD-dominated NUG and EROs to prioritize the development of authority and governance at the sub-national level in their respective constituencies (Jolliffe, 2023). The NUG acts as a higher-level authority and governance structure in Burman regions, where it has issued various guidelines to PDFs on civilian administration and services. However, this has been highly challenging as the PDFs emerged and continue to operate largely autonomously, while the NUG lacks a local presence and resources for governance. Many PDFs have, nonetheless, created local governance bodies in line with NUG guidelines and work with the NUG, communities and civil society to provide and coordinate education, health care and humanitarian aid projects (Frontier Myanmar, 2023; National Unity Government, 2024).

In ethnic minority areas, the new resistance forces emerged within a political landscape that included either established EROs that were relatively small, such as in Karenni State, or large resistance groups with extensive military and governance capacity, such as in Karen areas. This has had consequences for the emergent governance systems. New local defense forces in Karenni State were able to partner with smaller EROs to form a joint political council. It developed into a nascent federal state government with an administration with eight departments that coordinates and supports local governance across the state. While administration provides coordination, local emergent governance is largely driven by cooperation among local armed actors, communities, civil society and striking civil servants, who set up education, health care and humanitarian aid projects (Frontier Magazine, 2023; Nachemson & Thaw, 2024). In Karen areas, on the other hand, the large Karen National Union was able to integrate new resistance forces into its command structure as auxiliary units, while absorbing striking civil servants into its established civilian administration. Consequently, the KNU expanded its control, authority and existing services among different communities in southeast Myanmar during the postcoup conflict (Karen Peace Support Network, 2023; South, 2022).

As part of its contention strategies, the NUG has also actively lobbied for international recognition as Myanmar's legitimate government, gaining some recognition from Western governments but no substantive foreign support in terms of funding, let alone military aid. The international community has been unable to play a mediating role in the conflict or secure independent humanitarian access, with the junta repeatedly rebuffing ASEAN's 'Five-Point Consensus Plan'. China has emerged as the only international actor wielding

## CHAPTER 2

significant influence in postcoup Myanmar through its ties with both the military and some EROs (who Beijing reportedly discouraged from joining the NUG-led coalition) (International Crisis Group, 2024). While China views the NUG with suspicion due to its courting of Western governments, Beijing has reportedly also been displeased with the military over the coup, as it had been developing warming relations with the NLD government. Moreover, China has grown annoyed with the junta for ignoring its pleas to crackdown on numerous online scam centers run by pro-army militias that target the Chinese public (International Crisis Group, 2024; Tower, 2024).

China diplomatically engaged and facilitated trade with the junta, yet it turned a blind eye when Rakhine, Kokang and Ta'ang EROs decided to come off the fence and challenge the regime in late 2023. The EROs launched an offensive together with some Burman movement groups that crushed regime forces in northern and western Myanmar, while their operations also closed scam centers in the border areas in cooperation with Chinese authorities. The military goals of these EROs and their desired forms of self-rule, and how they relate to the movement coalition's political goals, remain unclear. China subsequently facilitated talks between the sides that yielded a tenuous truce in northeastern Myanmar (International Crisis Group, 2024; Tower, 2024). However, conflict continued between Rakhine ERO and junta forces, while trapping vulnerable Rohingya communities between the warring parties, both which allegedly committed lethal violence and abuses against the minority. An International Crisis Group report (2024) suggested that, for the foreseeable future, China will continue its ambivalent approach of managing its leverage with both the regime and the EROs to maintain its position as dominant geopolitical actor in Myanmar, without seeking a comprehensive solution or engaging with the NUG.

# 3

## Theoretical framework

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The framework of this thesis helps examine how a broad protest movement for democracy can escalate to armed resistance and establish governance under a new state structure. This phenomenon remains relatively under-explained, and both aspects of a movement’s development merit greater scholarly attention (Florea, 2017; Pfeifer & Schwab, 2023, p. 11; Shesterinina, 2022; Tarrow, 2015, p. 4; Wood, 2015, pp. 457–458). My framework builds primarily on concepts and theories from the related fields of Contentious Politics (CP) and Social Movements Theory (SMT), with the former providing the overarching framework while I add concepts on armed resistance mobilization and dynamic statehood, respectively, from studies on Civil War and State-Society Relations.

CP is defined as, “Episodic, public, collective interaction among makers of claims and their objects when (a) at least one government is a claimant, an object of claims, or a party to the claims and (b) the claims would, if realized, affect the interests of at least one of the claimants” (Mcadam et al., 2001, p. 5). CP offers a holistic analytical framework for various forms of collective political struggle—ranging from violent and nonviolent collective action in social movements, revolutions, democratization and civil war—to identify similar processes and causal mechanisms across these forms of struggles. Rooted in insights from SMT, the CP literature broadly focuses on mobilization for political claim-making against powerholders, on the identities and interactions of established and new political actors conducting collective action, and on the forms and trajectory of that collective action (Mcadam et al., 2001, p. 32). CP analyzes how the dynamics of interaction between collective action challengers and powerholders develops and yield outcomes during an episode of heightened contention.

Following CP, my framework focuses on an episode of a protest movement mobilizing for democracy and helps explain the processes through which it escalates to armed resistance and establishes governance. I add the scope condition that the protest movement coalition has links to established armed

actors inside the country. Below, I first outline some key concepts and theories that are central to understanding movement mobilization. Then, I formulate the mechanisms by which a protest movement can escalate to an armed uprising and the micro-level processes through which individuals join armed resistance. I offer a further analytical framework to analyze how a broad resistance coalition can pursue the creation of state institutions and governance.

### 3.1 Building a movement: coalitions, framing, networks, repertoires

A movement often begins in response to an apparent change in the political opportunity structure, such as a weakness or threat posed by an authoritarian regime (Tarrow 2011). This prompts a range of opposition forces to form a coalition against a common opponent and start a cycle of mass protests (Tarrow, 2011; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). Movement activists seek to build a broad coalition among a range of opposition forces to combine forces against a common powerful opponent, such as an incumbent regime. The coalition actors jointly create an overarching movement identity and new political goal(s), coordinate collective action strategies and tactics, and share mobilized resources (Tarrow, 2011). New political forces tend to emerge during grassroots mobilization and often include, for example, student networks that lead street protests. Coalition formation in countries with repressive regimes may connect these new political forces with established opposition actors, such as elected lawmakers and armed resistance groups, all of whom can align under the movement's broad umbrella (Chenoweth, 2021).

Campaign framing is critical to building a broad coalition and encouraging widespread participation. This involves framing an inclusive collective identity for a movement and giving meaning to collective action that resonates across society (Tarrow, 2011). Democracy movements often frame a pluralistic collective identity of "the people" of a nation who are pitted against corrupt authoritarian elites, while stressing social justice, and promoting new visions and practices of democracy (Della Porta, 2014, p. 302). Campaign messages foster solidarity and diagnoses a common enemy and grievances, and also frame solutions by offering a course of action and a shared political goal (Benford & Snow, 2000). Once collective identities have mobilized people, campaign messages that maintain solidarity and signal to the movement how to respond to state measures become increasingly important (Tarrow, 2011, p. 152).

Mobilization for collective action relies primarily on established social networks. Friends, family and quotidian networks, ethnic and religious ties, and organizations such as volunteer groups, student associations, local political

party offices etc. act as building blocks for the local mobilization of individuals and communities. (Parkinson, 2013; Staniland, 2014). Furthermore, coalition formation and brokerage allow movement groups to newly connect and cooperate for mobilization across different sites and levels (Tarrow, 2011). In contemporary movements, digital networks facilitate the spread of movement messages and images of collective action across different sites and levels, and allow for rapid, flexible mobilization that enables swift responses to state measures, such as repression (Suh et al., 2017).

Collective action involves repertoires of contention based on nonviolence rooted in local social norms, resources, and prior episodes of mobilization. These tactics, however, continuously develop during a protest cycle, as activists interact with state authorities. “Early risers,” in particular, respond to state measures by innovating, adapting, and diffusing motivational frames and collective action among the wider movement (Tilly and Tarrow 2015). New contention forms and motivational frames—when proven effective—diffuse through the social settings, movement networks a digital communication networks, prompting other protest groups to follow the early risers’ example (Tarrow, 2011, pp. 205–206). An upward scale shift may occur, if new forms of collective action diffuse widely and are adopted by national-level actors as a coordinated strategy for the movement (Tilly & Tarrow, 2015, pp. 125–126).

### 3.2 Escalation: Repression, framing, resource mobilization

This framework assumes that the escalation of a collective action repertoire and its diffusion emerge from similar interaction dynamics, with a movement adapting its tactical responses to state measures by shifting from protest to violent escalation (Della Porta, 2018). More specifically, it theorizes that three inter-related mechanisms of repression, framing and resource mobilization drive the process of escalation to an armed uprising during movement-state interactions. Authoritarian regimes often deploy indiscriminate state repression that impacts nonviolent protestors, which can “backfire” and become “transformative events” for a movement as they prompt public outrage and intensify grievances against the state (Della Porta, 2018; Hess & Martin, 2006; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015). This backfire can lead to increased mobilization for subsequent protest waves, a movement’s shift from reformist to maximalist demands, or the escalation to violent tactics by movement actors (Bosi et al., 2016; Kang, 2023). State repression may also succeed in stifling contention and its varying effects on movement mobilization remain a “punishment puzzle” subject to inquiry (Davenport, 2007).

A broad and loosely organized democracy movement is more likely to

## CHAPTER 3

escalate, as it lacks sufficient cohesion to maintain nonviolent discipline, leading some movement actors to respond to repression with self-defense, which may then diffuse to other movement groups and spread conflict (Bosi et al., 2016; Florea, 2017). Studies show that following escalation, diverse movements often fragment into armed groups formed along ethnic lines as movement solidarity and coalition unity break down (Della Porta, 2018; Mustasilta & Svensson, 2023; Pearlman, 2011).

This framework, however, theorizes an under-examined trajectory in which a diverse democracy movement unifies and jointly mobilizes resources for a coordinated armed uprising. Campaign framing is critical to determining such a movement's trajectory following repressive acts, as these events represent key junctures open for interpretation; activists seek to galvanize and transform the movement at these moments through shifts in movement framing (Jasper, 2014; Johnston, 2015, p. 272). Activists can align a diverse movement behind armed struggle if their campaign messages maintain coalition unity and a strong collective identity, and if they can justify an armed response to repression and channel public emotions such as outrage into broad support (Della Porta 2018; Hess and Martin 2006).

Following such effective campaign framing, I argue that grassroots activists can mobilize important basic resources for rudimentary resistance in their community networks. This mechanism draws on Civil War studies that have shown that dense social structures providing important basic resources and recruits are the backbone of incipient armed resistance mobilization (Parkinson, 2013; Petersen, 2001; Staniland, 2014). Subsequently, grassroots activist can mobilize extra-local military resources by contacting established armed resistance organizations within the movement coalition. Once an effective armed repertoire has been pioneered, the tactic can diffuse to other protest groups and, through a process of upward scale shift, movement leaders can launch a coordinated resource mobilization strategy for an uprising (Tilly & Tarrow, 125-126). While most movement escalation studies have paid little attention to resources or pointed to the roles of established armed groups, defection of security forces, foreign state backers, and natural resource exploitation, my framework argues that grassroots protestors can drive the mobilization of required resources within community networks and the broader movement coalition (Bell & Murdie, 2018; Della Porta et al., 2018; Demirel-Pegg, 2014; Hazen, 2009; Ryckman, 2020).

### 3.3 Micro-level escalation: defending a collective identity

This study's framework also pays attention to individual participation in protest and escalation to resistance in response to state repression. Drawing on micro-level studies of high-risk protest and armed resistance, the framework builds on a key insight: personal motivation emerges through identification with a movement's collective identity, while an individual's interactions with his/her social networks helps relay campaign messages from the movement and provide direct access to it (Viterna, 2013). As noted, collective identity and giving meaning to collective action are central to initiating and maintaining individual participation in a movement. Snow (2001) describes "collective identity [as] constituted by a shared and interactive sense of 'we-ness' and collective agency," generated in a dynamic, ongoing process of repeated interaction.

The movement's campaign messages not only present a collective identity with broad appeal but also portray the group as threatened by an external actor, thus requiring solidarity and protective collective action (Flesher Fominaya, 2010). Emotional responses to external threats are encouraged by campaigns, as individuals are more likely to identify with a movement if they share emotions with those already in it (Viterna, 2013). Furthermore, (armed) movements offer in-process benefits that attract and keep participants engaged, as they share, for example, emotions like joy and pride in their group's political agency (Pearlman, 2013, 2018; Wood, 2003).

A protestor's choice to join escalation can be explained as a response to repression that deepens individual identification with their protest group and wider movement, prompting a defensive reaction on its behalf. As noted, violent repressive acts by an authoritarian regime prompt widespread feelings of outrage, indignation, and revenge, which deepens micro-level processes of bonding as individuals experience "intense emotions of identification" with a group or community and want to defend it (Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018; Della Porta, 2018, p. 465). Amid such developments, individuals may view armed resistance as a justified form of collective action to express their agency and protect their community (Bosi & Ó Dochartaigh, 2018; Viterna, 2013). If many protestors join escalation, this implies that a democracy movement has developed a strong, broad collective identity that different protestors can identify with and wish to protect.

### 3.4 Negotiating statehood through a movement: governance, authority

Thus far, based largely on existing studies, this framework has theorized how a national democracy movement can foster the formation of a broad coalition of new and established opposition forces under a pluralistic collective identity of “the people,” who jointly mobilize for (armed) collective action. Moreover, I argue that such a movement can also offer a shared space for a coalition and to formulate visions and practices for a democratic government that should replace an authoritarian regime. But how an armed movement coalition reshapes the state and establishes governance in areas controlled by its forces remains unexplored in SMT and CP studies.

As Bosi and Malthaner (2015) note, these studies have largely focused on how movements challenge a regime rather than rule in its place. They suggest that adding insights from Civil War studies on rebel governance can help examine such developments. However, “most studies of rebel governance focus on a single group or are quantitative in nature,” while these studies generally do not explain the onset and consolidation of resistance groups through movement escalation (O’Connor, 2022; Pfeifer & Schwab, 2023, p. 11). Therefore, I argue that a different, broader framework is needed to capture the phenomenon of a national movement coalition of resistance actors that establishes governance and remakes the state.

For this, I turn to State-Society Relations studies that conceptualize statehood as a process subject to continuous change. This dynamic statehood involves state actors and various non-state (armed) actors who contest and bargain over power and authority, with all involved in ‘doing the state’ (Boege et al., 2009; Lund, 2006; Meagher, 2012; Migdal & Schlichte, 2016, pp. 14–15; Sosnowski, 2020). This perspective of statehood in flux, I argue, closely aligns with an episode of contention during which a protest movement coalition escalates to armed resistance and seeks to establish a new political order and systems of governance. My framework builds in particular on the work of Hagmann and Péclard (2010), which analyzes state power and authority in (post)conflict areas, ceasefire zones or peripheries by identifying by who and how the state-making process is shaped, and what the main political spaces and issues at stake are.

I adapt their framework by placing it within an episode of contention by a democracy movement, whose actors, shared political space, and aims drive changes in statehood and governance. Thus, I conceptualize a movement coalition and its resistance campaign against an authoritarian regime as the locus of contestation, negotiation and bricolage over state power and legitimate

authority (Ibid. p.439). These movement processes can, respectively, entail armed and nonviolent strategies to control the state administration and territory, coalition negotiations over national state structures and local governance forms, and bricolage across movement networks to develop civilian administrations and services on the ground. I term this framework “negotiating statehood through movements,” though I should emphasize that this includes a focus on governance, which is defined more broadly than the state, as it includes both formal institutions and informal governance forms (Pfeifer & Schwab, 2023, p. 3).

### 3.5 Theoretical contributions

The study has developed a theoretical framework that can capture the emergence of a broad movement coalition for democracy, its escalation to armed uprising, and its pursuit of state-making and governance. This analytical lens frames these developments as a single phenomenon that can be examined through concepts from CP and SMT, with additional knowledge from Civil War and State-Society Relations studies. Thus, the thesis sheds light on the relationship between social movements, civil war and statehood by integrating insights from different scholarly fields. In doing so, the study answers the call from scholars to bridge traditional scholarly boundaries to better understand how movement escalation can lead to civil war and to examine the relationship and similarities between mobilization for protest movement and for armed resistance (Florea, 2017; Shesterinina, 2022; Tarrow, 2007; Tilly & Tarrow, 2015; Wood, 2015). The thesis contributes to a small but growing body of literature that analyzes such linkages and transitions between social movements and armed resistance (Bell & Murdie, 2018; Della Porta et al., 2018; Demirel-Pegg, 2014; Granzow et al., 2015; Hazen, 2009; Mustasilta & Svensson, 2023; Ryckman, 2020; Viterna, 2015; Wood, 2003).

The thesis’ framework offers a specific contribution to theorizing on movement escalation by highlighting the oft-overlooked role of resource mobilization. It argues that grassroots protestors can mobilize resources in local social networks and movement coalition networks to develop an armed repertoire that can diffuse across a movement. Moreover, my “negotiating statehood in a movement” framework theorizes that a national democracy movement serves as a locus not only for coalition-building and mobilization for (armed) resistance, but also acts as a shared space for coalition actors to establish territorial control and governance under a new state framework. This analytical framework contributes to scholarship on movement escalation, dynamic statehood and rebel governance, which have largely left this kind of political phenomenon under-examined.



# 4

## Methodology

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This chapter concerns the thesis' research design and methodology. I explain the choice for an in-depth single case study and the process-tracing method and, discuss my approach to data collection and analysis.

### 4.1 Single case study design

Determining the research design of the study begins by defining and delimiting a research problem, which requires careful consideration of the nature of the phenomenon, i.e., what is the case of the study, and what it is a case of? (Lund, 2014; Ragin & Becker, 1992). As noted in the Introduction, through the study of the Myanmar case the research seeks answers to the question of how a democracy movement coalition can escalate to an armed uprising and establish governance and new state institutions. Hence, the study aims to explain how a protest movement can develop during an episode of contention and produce certain political outcomes. By this, I mean that the study will provide a causal explanation “describing what happened and what caused that thing to happen” in the case of the Myanmar movement, which can reveal the concatenation of processes and mechanisms that produced the outcomes (Saylor, 2020, p. 15). This is distinct from case studies that produce evidence to make inferences that connect data to a hypothesis and/or to test cross-case covariational patterns (Saylor, 2020).

The study uses an in-depth, single case study design as it can best answer ‘how’ and ‘why’ research questions, since it can provide a comprehensive understanding of complex socio-political processes (Yin, 2009). George and Bennett (2005, pp. 19–22) further note several comparative advantages of case studies, amongst others: a higher conceptual validity as the researcher can refine the indicators that represent theoretical concepts, or the close examination of causal mechanisms in individual cases. Moreover, selecting a case for in-depth study of a process can also offer valuable insights into the various aspects and actors that produce it, as “single cases are not *single* but rather marked by constitutive multiplicity” (Riofrancos, 2021, p. 109, italics in

original). This argument about casing is relevant for the Myanmar movement, as it comprises numerous, interacting actors, regions, and levels. In closing, I should note that the choice between single/small-N qualitative cases or large-N cases for quantitative analysis involves a much-debated trade-off between the strengths and limitations of each approach. Notably, a single/small-N case study lacks in generalizability. (George & Bennett, 2005; King et al., 1994; Small, 2009). However, I share the position of George and Bennett and various other scholars who argue that findings from single/small-N case studies can, nonetheless, also speak to other cases.

## 4.2 Process-tracing method

The process-tracing (PT) method can provide insights into how socio-political processes occur and generate outcomes during an episode of change (Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Saylor, 2020). Thus, PT offers a fitting method to produce an account of how the Myanmar movement case developed. Widely used in Contentious Politics, Sociology and Political Science, PT can uncover the causal mechanisms and conditions that produce certain outcomes in cases, going beyond establishing correlations between structural variables and outcomes to locate the “transforming events...that link effects to causes” (George & Bennett, 2005; McAdam, Doug et al., 2008, p. 309). Or, more simply put, “[T]racing ‘what follows what’ in an episode with care will provide a causal story of the entire process” (McAdam, Doug et al., 2008, p. 308).

Moreover, PT can be used to construct an explanation of a single case that can be presented in a narrative (Crasnow, 2017). As notes Saylor (p.16), “case studies that are understood to be explanatory... are constructions of an explanation of an individual case... To construct an explanation, researchers use process tracing to illuminate the concatenation between a cause and its effect.” Guided by the PT method, this study presents its own causal story narrative that coheres key events, actions, and entities of the Myanmar movement to explain the processes and mechanisms that drove escalation and emergence of governance at different movement levels. Additionally, in the analysis of escalation at the micro level, the thesis coheres several individuals’ paths to revolution in personal stories to trace the processes and mechanisms that drove participation in protests and subsequently armed resistance.

## 4.3 Data collection

The primary data of this study consists of interviews with key Myanmar respondents involved in the resistance movement, along with extensive secondary data sources. Soon after the coup, I began monitoring events in Myanmar and collected news media reports, civil society documents, public

statements and social media posts by movement actors etc. Between March 2021 and February 2023, I gathered original material through 46 semi-structured interviews covering themes such as coalition formation, campaign framing, resource mobilization, resistance strategies, emergent governance and political negotiations over state institutions. Interviewees included members of the new ‘defense forces’, ethnic resistance organizations, civil society activists, NUG cabinet members, senior movement advisors, MPs from the NLD and ethnic parties, and journalists. To capture the diversity of the movement, respondents were selected from different genders and a cross-section of ethnic groups, organizations and socio-economic backgrounds, while some individuals have specific intersectional identities.

Interviews generally lasted between 1.5 to 2.5 hours; an interview guide is provided in Appendix 2. More than half of the interviews were conducted online from Sweden and the rest during fieldwork among Myanmar exiles in northeastern Thailand from December 2021 to January 2022. The interviews were conducted with the help of two very capable, Thailand-based research assistants from Myanmar, whose networks and understanding were key to collection and interpretation of data. My method of collection and analysis of the data also builds on the networks, knowledge, and experience I developed while working in Myanmar as a journalist and an UNHCR officer from 2012 to 2018.

Following the PT method, my analysis of the data sought to locate the key actors, turning points and processes that drove the development of the Myanmar movement. I processed the data by selecting the most significant comments from the interviews based on the relevant research themes and coded these accordingly. As certain comments and interviewees came into closer focus during the analysis of data concerning the movement’s escalation and governance, I returned to the full interviews to confirm their meaning and consider their context. In the four articles, cited interviews are appended when they are sources of specific observations and quoted comments. The secondary data were also coded based on research themes and consulted for information on the movement’s development, as well as to supplement or triangulate findings from the interview material.



# 5

## Ethical and methodological challenges

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The 2021 coup posed new ethical and methodological challenges, as it dramatically worsened the situation in-country in terms of access and the safety of respondents. Conducting interviews with Myanmar exiles in Thailand or elsewhere also posed serious concerns. To address these issues, well-established ethical themes guided my fieldwork, such as informed consent and confidentiality, protection of digital data and online communications, and ‘do no harm’ principles. I also faced the practical issue of adapting my Ph.D. project to the postcoup situation. The sections below first turn to the latter issue, before discussing how the study managed the ethical and methodological challenges.

### 5.1 A military coup, and a Ph.D. project disrupted

When I embarked on this Ph.D. project in 2018, I set out to examine how limited democratization unfolds in divided societies. I focused on improving the understanding of the interplay between democratization and ethnic cleavages, which remains a subject of scholarly debate (Haggard & Kaufman, 2016). I planned to do so through a single case study of Myanmar, where the transition from authoritarian rule to a “hybrid regime” (2011-2021) was affecting minorities’ pursuit of greater political rights after decades of state repression. While dominated by the military and NLD, the hybrid political system provided new opportunities for ethnic minorities to pursue greater political influence and rights—though with significant differences between minorities, as some saw their situation dramatically worsen (Egreteau, 2016; Stokke, 2020; Stokke et al., 2022). This led me to examine why the transition in Myanmar appeared to produce different outcomes for the rights of minorities.

However, the global pandemic repeatedly pushed back my fieldworks for data collection, and then the 2021 coup scuttled all such plans and threw my research plans into doubt. I was left stunned by what had befallen the country, where I maintained friendships and contacts after working several years as a journalist and with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. I also did not know what it would mean for my Ph.D. project. After weeks of intense ‘Myanmar watching’ and seeing that a historic protest movement was emerging, I consulted my supervisors, and we opted in March 2021 to refocus my study on the thesis’ current themes. As we realized a timely, original knowledge contribution could be made by analyzing this sudden political change. This new focus maintains links to my original research query in that it also examines ethnic minorities’ adaptation to major changes in the political center and how they changed their interactions with mainstream political actors in pursuit of greater rights. As I collected secondary data on events and began exploring options for conducting interviews, this approach proved to be a sound decision as political developments intensified with the movement’s escalation and its creation of new state institutions and governance.

## 5.2 Ethical and methodological challenges

The research analyzed resistance mobilization by movement participants against authoritarian rule. This politically sensitive issue entails risks to researchers and for interviewees, who engaged with me mostly from ‘the field’. During this data collection, I leveraged my extensive knowledge of working on sensitive topics in conflict-affected contexts in Myanmar to address such risks, cause no harm, and ensure clear communications with interviewees. The challenges in studying postcoup Myanmar echo those highlighted by other scholars working in authoritarian and conflict contexts, and I extensively consulted their recommendations on these issues for this research (Brounéus, 2011; Morgenbesser & Weiss, 2018; Van Baalen, 2018; Wackenhut, 2018; Wood, 2006). Moreover, the research followed the Swedish Research Council’s ethical guidelines on “Good research practice” in this regard (Swedish Research Council, 2017).

The following measures were taken to minimize ethical and security risks. I ensured prior informed consent by explaining my research, and its publication, and the measures taken to protect personal data. The informed and prior consent process, and the right to withdrawal at any time based on personal concerns of respondents, were clearly communicated to respondents. Personal data were anonymized by removing, obscuring or changing details, such as locations, armed unit details and age, which could be used to possibly identify an individual. Any interviewees named in the text were pseudonymized to

protect their identities (Heaton, 2022; Swedish Research Council, 2017). To avoid the risk of digital surveillance, hacking or phishing by regime elements, I ensured the secure digital communication through encrypted apps and secured storage of data in an offline location (Van Baalen, 2018). Clear communications about such measures and listening to suggestions from respondents and my Myanmar research assistants on how to conduct interviews has been crucial safe data collection and avoiding causing harm (Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019).

Many interviewees preferred Zoom and Signal, even though some would have been able to meet in person during my fieldwork in Thailand, as their legal status there was often tenuous, and they preferred to stay indoors. Following the coup, there has been a major shift in Myanmar toward secure and encrypted communications apps like Signal and Telegram, while the prior pandemic regulations appear to have also ‘trained’ many in online meetings. This shift has been crucial to mobilization of the movement, as well as for its outreach to the international community and diaspora. This increased connectivity and security awareness across Myanmar has also allowed me to conduct online meetings with necessary precautions. My personal networks and those of my research assistants have been valuable in gaining trust of respondents. The oft-recommended snowball-sampling method in risky environments, which involves finding new respondents through referrals by a previous respondent (Cohen & Arieli, 2011), has been of little use as people were very careful to not unnecessarily expose each other.

During interviews I remained aware of the risk of asking about traumatic events during mobilization and I inquired carefully to ensure respondents were comfortable discussing sensitive issues, such as their escape from arrest. When writing the articles, I also considered the broader question of whether the empirical material and insights on resistance mobilization could cause possible harm. However, I have come to conclude that, overall, the Myanmar conflict and its resistance fighters suffer from a dearth of scholarly and international diplomatic attention and understanding. This study, and other publications like it, may help somewhat in this regard. In closing, I should also mention I took all necessary measures to limit the risk of COVID-infection during fieldwork. I was fully vaccinated, carried relevant ID and COVID-vaccination documentation and stayed informed about most recent local regulations. In Thailand, like elsewhere in Asia, masks were mandatory and widely expected by the public as a basic health measure, and I happily complied, which made it easier to meet people safely.

### 5.3 Research ‘brokers’ and positionality

Another fieldwork challenge is posed by the role of local ‘research broker,’ who performs crucial tasks such as translating and gaining access to respondents etc. (Eriksson Baaz & Utas, 2019). This role is risky, fraught with ethical and methodological challenges, and highly influential on research outcomes; it can sometimes merit a designation as a co-author. In my cooperation with my Myanmar research assistants, I have tried to ensure a good working relationship so that fair compensation, responsibility and risk are jointly agreed upon.

In qualitative research, reflexivity and positionality are also considered important methods for addressing difficult ethical questions regarding how a researcher’s subjectivity influences the research process and his/her ability to represent and know the Other (Pillow, 2003). I define reflexivity as the process of maintaining awareness of my positionality throughout the research. For example, during interviews, when being a foreigner with limited local-language skills makes me an obvious outsider, which is enhanced by my lack of full understanding of, for example, Buddhist belief systems. That being said, I do not necessarily subscribe to a strong insider-outsider dichotomy (Griffith, 1998). I think that sustained reflexivity and my extensive experience in Myanmar can go a long way in addressing these challenges. Lastly, reflexivity also entails being aware of the fact that I make claims about issues that are part of a politically sensitive and potentially polarizing discourse in Myanmar (Brooten & Metro, 2014).

During my time in Myanmar I also regularly visited Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, and my networks there were particularly helpful in gaining access to Myanmar exiles following the coup. Many former journalist colleagues have had to flee abroad and during a visit to the border town of Mae Sot I happened to find a former colleague living in an U.N. agency-run guesthouse. While it was great to see him and he eagerly helped me understand Myanmar’s situation much better, he was not allowed to leave the guesthouse due to his illegal entry into Thailand. Sadly, he remains there three years later, as he has not yet been resettled to a third country. For me, it is a stark reminder of the privileges of being an outsider.

# 6

## Summaries of the articles

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The thesis provides an overarching understanding of the movement's escalation to armed resistance and establishment of governance that is drawn from the research findings of four individual papers. Two articles have been published and two are to be submitted to peer-reviewed journals. Each article contains its own research question focusing on a different aspect of the development of the Myanmar movement that yields certain findings and contributions (Table 1). The insights from these studies, which shift their focus between different levels of the movement, complement each other and to some extent overlap. Respectively, Articles I, II, II, and IV broadly analyze how a coalition was built to contest the army and redefine Myanmar's political order, how the movement escalated to armed resistance, what motivated micro-level mobilization for armed revolution, and how the coalition actors pursued the establishment of a new state and local governance. The papers provide comprehensive insights into the processes that influenced the trajectory of the Myanmar movement and the development of its mutually reinforcing mobilization strategies. All articles are primarily based on extensive interviews with movement members and secondary sources, while the findings came about by tracing key processes, events and actors within the movement.

Table 1 Summary of articles

Article	Research question	Theoretical framework	Method	Main findings
I	Why did Myanmar's ethnic minorities adopt divergent responses to the 2021 coup?	Empirical analysis grounded in contentious politics	Process-tracing minority elites' responses at national level through interviews, secondary sources	Civil society was central to supporting the movement. Only EROs with strong links to civil society joined movement. Ethnic parties faded from politics.
II	How can a protest movement escalate into an armed uprising?	Social movement coalition building and escalation; repression, campaign message framing, resource mobilization	Process-tracing tactical escalation from grassroots emergence to national diffusion through interviews, secondary sources	Movement can turn to uprising through mechanisms of repression, frames supporting coalition unity and armed response, and resource mobilization across coalition networks.
III	What motivated Myanmar protestors to join the emergent armed resistance?	Individual motivation for high-risk collective action; movement collective identity, group emotions, social networks	Tracing five personal paths from protest participation to armed resistance through interviews	Individuals identify with movement's inclusive collective identity, shared emotions and social networks. Repression intensifies this process and prompts defensive response.
IV	How can a resistance movement establish governance and authority?	Social movement coalition building; negotiating statehood	Process-tracing the coalition's creation of state institutions and local governance through interviews, secondary sources	A movement's shared political space helps a coalition to establish a new state, but this is challenging, and local governance is likely to develop most strongly.

### Article I. Joining the Spring Revolution or Charting Their Own Path? Ethnic Minority Strategies following the 2021 Myanmar Coup

(*Asian Survey*, 2023).

This article entails a national-level empirical analysis of *why Myanmar's ethnic minorities adopted diverse responses to the 2021 military coup*. This analysis traced the events and responses of ethnic resistance organizations (EROs), civil society organizations, and ethnic political parties among Myanmar's main minorities during the first seven months after the coup. The findings suggest that ethnic civil society organizations recognized the public outrage over the coup an opportunity to build a broad-based movement coalition at both the local and national levels. They adopted a key coordinating role and mobilized for resistance accordingly. EROs adopted divergent strategies that were primarily influenced by their relationships with co-ethnic

civil society and by their military strength. The Kachin, Karen, Karenni, and Chin EROs partnered with the National Unity Government, as they maintained close relations with vibrant co-ethnic civil society and were responsive to their demands for continued resistance and coalition-building.

Many other EROs, however, stayed outside the movement and pursued their own interests by adopting various positions, which ranged from maintaining their nationwide ceasefire status with the junta to enhancing their military positions and territorial control without provoking the regime. Most ethnic parties avoided resistance or were coopted, as they feared junta retaliation, and declined to partner with the National League for Democracy since it had marginalized ethnic parties during its terms in government. The article deepens our understanding of the national coalition-building process and its challenges during the movement's emergence by capturing the range of perspectives among minority actors in Myanmar's border areas as they come to terms with a rupture in the political center. The article also showed that civil society organizations played a central role during coalition building for the movement and were able to do because of the campaign experience and networks they developed during the democratic opening and their long-running opposition to central state repression.

**Article II. Movement Escalation and Mobilization for Resistance: From Anti-coup Protest to 'People's War' in Myanmar** (*Political Geography*, 2024).

Through a case study of Myanmar's Spring Revolution, this article examines *how a protest movement can escalate into an armed uprising*, a phenomenon that remains relatively underexplained in existing scholarship. The study analyzed how escalation unfolded in the Burman-majority and ethnic-minority regions where protest groups first resisted junta repression with basic arms and military aid from ethnic resistance organizations. It also examines how this armed repertoire then diffused across the national movement. Drawing on social movements and contentious politics studies, and, to a limited extent, civil war studies, the article's findings suggests that regime repression can trigger swift escalation to and diffusion of armed tactics within a broad movement coalition that has links to established armed actors. The article argues that effective campaign framing is critical in channeling public anger over repression into movement solidarity and in legitimizing an armed response.

Moreover, mobilization of resources within community and coalition networks, through increased movement cooperation, is key to organizing armed resistance and its diffusion. The article contributes novel insights by

showing that a diverse movement can escalate and unify for armed resistance, rather than fragment as previous studies have most often found. The article improves our understanding of how movements with links to established armed actors may escalate by providing detailed insights into how cooperation between mainstream protestors and armed actors can transform a movement into an uprising.

**Article III. ‘Now 54 million People Want Revolution. Why Not Me?’ Micro-foundations of Movement Escalation to Armed Resistance in Myanmar (to be submitted to *Mobilization*).**

Drawing on social movements and contentious politics studies, this article sheds light on the micro-foundations of high-risk mobilization through a case study of Myanmar’s anti-coup movement and its escalation in response to junta repression. Five personal stories of men and women were selected from extensive original interviews to provide answers to the article’s query of *what motivated individuals to protest and then join the new “People’s Defense Forces”?* The article shows that individuals identified with the movement’s inclusive collective identity and shared emotional responses in a process of mobilization supported by social networks and social media. The movement effectively leveraged identities, political practices, civil society, and social connections shaped during Myanmar’s prior democratization to produce a robust collective identity that maintained unity and participation during the escalation phase, when ethnically diverse movements commonly fragment.

These insights contribute to our understanding of how the prior socio-political context of a movement affects its framing of a collective identity and the civic mobilization structures it can activate. The article’s findings on the micro-level mechanism of escalation show that the impact of the junta’s crackdown on their person, networks and overall movement deepened individual protestors’ identification with the movement and prompted a personal choice to defend it by joining collective armed resistance. Participation was also motivated by meaningful experiences of pride in agency and solidarity within resistance groups, where young revolutionaries enacted a progressive political culture with new opportunities for women and previously unrecognized minorities. The findings echo existing studies on established micro-level mechanisms that drive resistance but contribute new insights by showing that these mechanisms can lead many young protestors to take up arms when a movement creates a new vehicle for resistance that fits with a politicized youth identity.

**Article IV. Negotiating Statehood through a Movement: Governance and Authority under Myanmar’s Resistance Coalition** (to be submitted to *Civil Wars*).

This article examines *how a movement coalition fighting an autocratic regime can establish authority and governance*. Using a case study of Myanmar’s movement for federal democracy, it analyzes how the diverse coalition created the National Unity Government (NUG) to replace the junta state. The study unpacks emergent local governance and authority systems among resistance actors in the Burman-majority, and the Karenni and Karen minority areas. To capture the under-examined phenomenon of governance and state-making by a broad resistance coalition, the article construes a theoretical framework dubbed “negotiating statehood in a movement.” It conceptualizes a movement as the locus of (violent) contestation, negotiation and bricolage by a coalition to gain power and establish a new state with legitimate authority. This framework builds on social movements and contentious politics studies, as well as on literature that views statehood as an ongoing, dynamic political process.

The study finds the NUG’s central role has remained weak due to the challenges of coalition power-sharing, while the National League for Democracy and ethnic minority resistance forces prioritized governance systems in their respective constituencies. Consequently, the movement’s governance displays regional patterns with different configurations of local authority and civilian administration, which range from scattered, local governance to a nascent federal state administration. The subnational governance systems are mostly complementary but occasionally competitive. Furthermore, the article’s findings deepen our understanding of complex forms of political order and governance involving multiple actors in civil war. The article contributes to scholarship on dynamic statehood as it shows how social movement processes can drive resistance and sweeping changes in state regimes and structures. The insights add to rebel governance studies by showing how popular movements can align governance by new resistance actors with established rebel rule, leading the emergence into a new political order.



# 7

## Conclusion

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This thesis aimed to explain how Myanmar's protest movement against the military regime turned to armed resistance and established governance. To this end, it pursued answers to three research questions: 1. How did the coup prompt established and new opposition actors to form a broad coalition to challenge the military's rule? 2. What motivated and enabled these opposition actors to escalate contention to armed struggle against the military's repression? 3. How did these opposition actors mobilize and cooperate to establish governance?

The phenomenon, as found in Myanmar, of a broad democracy movement that escalates to an uprising and tries to reshape the state remains relatively underexplored, and both aspects merit greater scholarly attention. To capture and analyze such a broad phenomenon, the thesis builds on theories and concepts drawn from the fields of Contentious Politics and Social Movements. The former provides a broad theoretical framework for analyzing an episode of contention in which a protest movement develops armed resistance and governance. The framework also adds concepts on armed mobilization and dynamic statehood, respectively, from studies on Civil War and State-Society Relations. This framework guided the analysis of the trajectory and outcomes of the Spring Revolution movement. The case study traced the key processes, turning points and actors in the development of the Myanmar movement by collecting data through extensive original interviews with movement participants and a wide range of secondary sources.

The remainder of the Conclusion will present the main findings related to the research questions and then elaborate on the contributions and overall argument of the thesis. I will also consider its potential implications for Myanmar's future. Finally, I end with reflections on further research directions concerning Myanmar's movement, as well as the broader issue of movement escalation and governance by resistance actors.

## 7.1 Main findings

My research on the Myanmar movement revealed the following main findings that help explain its development in terms of coalition formation, escalation to armed resistance, and the creation of governance systems.

### Building a national coalition and movement identity

The military coup posed a sudden, collective threat to political and socio-economic interests of different segments of society and various opposition actors. Thus, creating a shared sense of public outrage that became a transformative event for Myanmar's ethnically and socially divided society. In response, nonviolence movement emerged that seized on this sentiment with campaign messages that framed an inclusive, pluralistic collective identity of "the people" of Myanmar. Its campaign calls to action also channeled anger and moral shock into widespread protest participation and solidarity in a broad coalition against the military. The movement effectively mixed established and new repertoires of nonviolent contention, such as street protests, civil disobedience, and online dissent.

While it could draw on past mobilization episodes, the study found that the campaign messages were effective in framing a new movement identity that appealed to collective memory of past military rule, and recent experiences of democracy and political agency, while it also recognized ethnic minorities' marginalization and struggles for political autonomy. In this regard, the campaign messages crucially built on identities, political practices and experiences that developed in society during the recent democratic opening. Furthermore, prior liberalization had allowed for the growth of civil society and its campaign skills, while reforms fostered development of social resources and ties, including through the introduction of mobile internet and social media, all of which strengthened networks for mobilization. Notably, the democratic opening also entailed negative effects on ethnic relations caused by the NLD's Burman-centric politics of reconciliation with the army during its term in government. But the movement campaign addressed this by presenting it as a narrow, failed approach to democratization. By doing so the movement could frame an inclusive, robust collective identity that fostered inter-ethnic coalition building.

The vast movement was largely driven by progressive civil society and new grassroots political groups involving local strike committees, striking civil servants, student associations and many young protestors. The study showed how these movement groups in Burman and ethnic minority areas encouraged established political actors of the CRPH/NLD and four EROs to overcome their political divisions and agree to the goal of replacing the junta with a

federal democracy. This loosely organized coalition established a National Unity Government (NUG) to head the movement, and it pursued diverse contention strategies that targeted the military's state authority, legitimacy and economic resources.

New and established opposition forces also cooperated on a sub-national level in various configurations within communities and regions, where dense social structures and civil society networks enabled strong local grassroots mobilization. The movement's inter-ethnic solidarity and coalition building fostered coordination and sharing of campaign frames, collective repertoires and resources across new movement networks at both local and national levels, as well as among Myanmar's diaspora. The study explained how the protest movement thus succeeded in aligning new and established opposition forces, including armed actors, in an unprecedented national coalition with a strong collective identity and emergent political institutions, which could mobilize through various networks, resources, and repertoires.

## Escalation to an uprising and new forms of armed resistance

The state's launch of a lethal crackdown on the popular protest campaign became another trigger event that deepened public outrage and set the movement on an escalation trajectory. The movement was still forming its political leadership institutions and lacked coherence when repression hit, making it susceptible to a breakdown of nonviolent discipline, which ensued when some protest groups in remote areas organized improvised self-defense. Images of resistance were shared on social media by grassroots activists, along with campaign frames that justified escalation as a legitimate response to protect the movement, while they channeled public outrage over repression toward inter-ethnic solidarity and coalition cooperation.

Self-defense groups then formed into local armed resistance units by mobilizing important basic resources in community networks and by accessing outside military aid from ethnic resistance organizations in the coalition networks. The armed repertoire pioneered by these 'early risers' was widely emulated by other protest groups and diffused across the national movement through its digital campaign. In an upward scale shift, movement leaders—noting its effectiveness and widespread support—adopted it as the main resistance strategy. The new resistance forces together with established political or armed opposition actors in this manner increased cooperation and mobilized resources across the movement's networks to mount a loosely coordinated uprising across Myanmar.

Escalation at the micro-level concerned mostly young protestors who were

motivated to resist by their strong identification with the movement's collective identity, and through their positions in social networks and digital networks, while their participation in resistance also offered meaningful experiences. When state repression impacted them personally, their protest groups, or the overall movement, this led to individual or group action to evade, defend against or remove this external threat.

Emotional experiences of shock, anger and revenge after observing repression directly or on social media deepened their identification with (fellow) protestors taking up arms, as well as with ethnic minority communities that had long resisted state violence. Furthermore, the study showed that joining the resistance also offered an opportunity for protestors to maintain their positive collective identity, affective ties, political agency and activism for progressive, revolutionary change after mass nonviolence dwindled. An appropriate vehicle to enact this militant youth identity were the People's Defense Forces, which initially emerged ad hoc as activists banded together in various local networks to defend against repression. These decentralized forces offered a new resistance paradigm that was then framed as the young generation's own armed, political forces operating in a coalition with the established EROs and NLD.

### **A movement remaking the state and establishing governance**

Alongside coalition mobilization for armed contention to gain territorial control, the movement created a political process and a crucial shared space for the coalition of new and established opposition actors to forge new state institutions and local governance. The main coalition actors negotiated an agreement on federal democratic principles for the establishment of the NUG to replace military rule. The interim government could draw on the coalition's strong public legitimacy—based on the movement's popular support, the NLD's election mandate and the EROs' local authority—to effectively claim state authority and develop a civilian administration. However, institutionalizing a broad movement coalition into a national state structure that resolves longstanding questions about federal power-sharing is highly challenging. The main coalition actors of the CRPH/NLD and EROs were therefore unable to develop the NUG further into an effective central, executive political and administrative body. This situation left power and authority dispersed among these coalition actors, who instead focused on establishing authority and governance in their main constituencies together with local grassroots resistance forces.

As a result, the movement developed governance most strongly at

subnational level, where the study distinguished three patterns of governance that were shaped by the level of cooperation and the capacity of new grassroots forces and established political and armed actors. In Burman areas, highly localized authority and civil administration emerged under new movement forces who the CRPH/NLD struggled to coordinate and support through the NUG. In ethnic areas, large EROs expanded their authority and civilian services by integrating new resistance forces and governance actors into their military command and administrative systems. Small EROs, on the other hand, partnered with new resistance actors to jointly form a nascent federal state government that coordinated new civilian administration and services. While the study found the movement's governance developed unevenly, the overall coalition framework ensured that these emergent regional governance systems were complementary and only occasionally competitive. Moreover, the movement's inclusive collective identity and strong local and cross-cutting networks enabled bricolage for governance. As all armed coalition actors cooperated closely with local communities, civil society and diaspora networks under the movement's broad umbrella to improvise and mobilize limited resources for civilian service projects.

## 7.2 Contributions

The findings in the Myanmar case make several contributions to Contentious Politics, Social Movement Theory, State-Society Relations and Civil War studies. The study offers novel insights for movement escalation studies, as protest movements that unite to mount armed resistance remain poorly understood. The thesis shows how an ethnically diverse movement can unify following escalation if its campaign framing can maintain the movement's collective identity and promote an armed response and joint resource mobilization. This finding differs from existing studies that have found that protest movements commonly fragment during escalation. The study deepens our understanding of the phenomenon of movement cooperation for escalation by providing a theoretical framework that explains the inter-related mechanisms at work. As it shows how state repression, campaign framing, and resource mobilization can transform a movement into an uprising. Additionally, the study also improves our understanding of escalation of protest movement coalitions that include established armed organizations. While such coalition have been shown to be at risk during escalation, this thesis provides new, detailed insights into exactly how cooperation between mainstream protestors and armed actors can enable swift mobilization for armed resistance across a movement.

Furthermore, the thesis deepens our understanding of microlevel

mobilization for high-risk collective action. As it shows that individuals are motivated to join a movement campaign if it can frame a pluralistic collective identity and democratic goals with which they can strongly identify. In line with established mechanisms, when repression threatens protestors, their networks and the movement, this identification process intensifies and prompts individuals to come to the movement's defense through armed resistance. Significantly, the thesis showed how repression against a strong youth identity within a movement can spur escalation by young activists, who create their own armed groups to defend the movement, as well as their revolutionary culture and political goals. This resistance vehicle then offers an opportunity for many protestors to resist. This finding is novel as prior high-risk mobilization studies have mostly examined why individual activists join pre-existing armed resistance organizations in response to the repression of their movement or community.

The thesis' theoretical framework on movement escalation also contributes more broadly to theorizing on the relationship between social movements and civil war. As it analyzes a protest movement's turn to arms and creation of governance as a single phenomenon during an episode of contentious politics, while the thesis integrates insights from different scholarly fields to strengthen the analysis. In doing so, the study answers the call from leading scholars to bridge scholarly boundaries to better study the relationship between social movements and civil war. The thesis joins a small but growing number of studies that similarly analyze the linkages between movements and armed resistance.

The thesis, furthermore, shows that a democracy movement can offer a shared political space for a coalition of new and established opposition actors to establish governance under a new state structure in order to replace authoritarian rule. It contributes to theorizing on this subject by formulating the 'negotiating statehood through a movement' framework. It outlines how a democracy movement can act as a locus for coalition actors to jointly contest a regime, and to negotiate and create new state institutions and local governance. The study finds, nonetheless, that coalition cooperation can run into challenges when negotiating power-sharing in a new state structure, which can cause coalition actors to instead focus on developing governance in their regional constituencies. Thus, a resistance movement coalition appears more likely, initially at least, to produce distinct subnational, rather than centralized forms of governance. Through these insights, the thesis deepens our understanding of state-making and governance by a movement coalition in armed conflict, which remains a largely under-examined phenomenon.

Finally, the thesis contributes to the limited but developing scholarship on

postcoup Myanmar. It is my hope that the empirical findings and material in the thesis will help other scholars better understand the country's movement and conflict landscape. Similarly, I think policymakers could benefit from the study's insights. Equipped with a deeper understanding of Myanmar's complex conflict landscape and diverse resistance actors, international aid actors could avoid a one-size-fits-all approach to peacebuilding and humanitarian assistance in the country.

### 7.3 Concluding argument and Myanmar's future

Taken together, the thesis' findings in the Myanmar case demonstrate the immense potential of national democracy movements to challenge entrenched authoritarian regimes. A protest movement can create inclusive collective identities, new political narratives and democratic goals, which can mobilize an ethnically divided society and opposition into a broad coalition pursuing collective political struggle. A movement is particularly resilient and can challenge regime repression if its mobilization campaign can build on identities, political practices and experiences, and civil society structures shaped by a recent period of political openness and democratization. While this broadly aligns with the theory that social networks and political context influence movement mobilization, this study shows that democratization in an authoritarian regime affords opportunities to build a broad movement coalition with extensive resources that can respond to repression with new contention strategies.

Though this argument can shed light on the trajectory of various movements that face repression, I focus on national movements that emerged in a country with pre-existing armed resistance groups, which can come under the movement's broad umbrella. When met with repression, such a broad coalition can increase cooperation across its networks to launch a popular uprising and to build a new state, rather than fragment and produce armed factions during escalation as often occurs. This argument contributes to scholarly debates on social movements' resilience and possible escalation pathways by highlighting how a prior socio-political context can affect a mobilization campaign and its response to state repression.

What the future holds for the Myanmar's movement in its efforts to establish federal democracy is impossible to predict, yet its current trajectory shows some similarities with mobilization for armed resistance that forced "democratization from below" in other cases. The "insurgent path to democracy," described by Elizabeth Wood in El Salvador and South Africa, illustrated how political and economic exclusion by regimes fueled national

democracy movements driven by excluded grassroots groups across society (Wood, 2000, 2003). When faced with brutal state repression, these movements escalated into popular insurgencies that mixed armed and nonviolent resistance (and also included local governance by resistance groups in El Salvador). This sustained mass mobilization eventually threatened the economic elites' interests in these countries, which pressured the state to compromise and strengthened regime moderates, who then negotiated transitions to democracy. Myanmar's current situation echoes the first stages of this trajectory and—although the current global political context of autocratization differs starkly from the “Third Wave” of democratization that marked these other cases—it is entirely conceivable that the movement can force major political change within the junta's leadership. Let us hope that Myanmar's movement's resistance coalition can also achieve such democratization from below.

## 7.4 Future research directions

Though this thesis offered comprehensive insights into armed resistance and governance under Myanmar's coalition, it painted a somewhat broad picture of the various forms of emergent governance within the vast movement. Moreover, the research excluded some powerful resistance actors operating outside of the movement. Thus, further research on Myanmar could zoom in on certain aspects of new state authority and governance systems. For instance, research could examine how specific communities experience and seek to influence local governance developments since the coup. Scholars could investigate how international (aid) actors have engaged (or not) with the emergent state institutions and local governance systems.

Future research could also focus on emergent governance in western and northeastern Myanmar, where the allied Rakhine, Kokang and Ta'ang ethnic resistance groups, who remain outside the coalition, have greatly expanded their territorial control and civilian administration since late 2023, including through the capture of key cities and border crossings. Understanding these actors' emergent governance and how it compares with that of the movement is likely to produce valuable insights into Myanmar's emergent political order, which can also enrich the broader literature on rebel governance in civil wars and emergent forms of statehood.

The scope of my research has been somewhat limited by the inherent difficulty of gathering sufficient data on the vast phenomenon of a movement escalating across numerous places, both online and in real life. This naturally led me to single out certain important aspects for analysis at the expense of others. While I (and other researchers) found indications that social media

campaigns and digital networks were significant to the movement's escalation, online mobilization data were not included in this study. Future research could seek to improve understanding of the role of online contention; for example, through legitimizing messages and coordinating the mobilization of resources during the Myanmar movement's escalation. Such insights could advance broader theory on social media's role in movement escalation and conflict onset.

Lastly, the thesis' main argument that a movement's prior socio-political context can influence the strength and options for resistance mobilization is highly relevant in the current global context of growing contention against autocratization. It shows that many such movements can build on recent political openness to rally broad opposition coalitions in resilient mobilization campaigns against authoritarian rule—and if these coalitions include pre-existing armed actors these movements may escalate swiftly in response to regime violence. This finding points to the need for further studies on mobilization that go beyond the dominant scholarly focus on nonviolence. This would allow us to better understand the range of contention strategies that movements may develop when faced with autocrats who meet popular demands for political and social change with harsh repression.



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# Appendix 1 - List of interviews

Interviews conducted between March 2021-February 2023. All Myanmar sources unless mentioned otherwise.

	Description	Date	Place
1	General Strike Committee of Nationalities member	11 Sept 2021, 11 Jan. 2022	Online, Thailand
2	Kachin religious leader	6 May 2021	Online
3	Karen National Union, Foreign Affairs Department spokesperson	4 May 2021, 31 Dec. 2021	Online, Thailand
4	Ethnic NUG cabinet member	11 May 2021	Online
5	NLD NUG cabinet member	4 Jan. 2022	Online
6	Karenni State Consultative Council member, Karenni activist	30 Dec. 2021, 12 Jan. 2022	Online, Thailand
7	Independent Chin analyst	9 Sept.2021, 6 Jan. 2022	Online
8	Shan political insider	7 May 2021	Online
9	Journalist 1 reporting on Shan State	27 Jan. 2022	Online
10	Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team member, Kachin activist	28 Dec. 2021	Thailand
11	Civil society leader	8 Jan. 2022	Online
12	Ethnic NUG cabinet member	11 Jan. 2022	Online
13	Kachin NGO director in Myitkyina	27 May 2021	Online
14	Kachin humanitarian NGO director in KIA area	23 Dec. 2022	Online
15	Ta'ang activist	7 Jan. 2021	Online
16	Ethnic armed groups' insider	12 April 2021	Online
17	Journalist 1, reporting on Kachin State	1 May 2021	Online
18	3 National League for Democracy MPs-elect from central Myanmar, joint interview	3 Jan. 2022	Thailand

APPENDIX

19	National League for Democracy MP-elect from central Myanmar	30 Dec. 2021	Thailand
20	Karen National Union, Brigade 5 spokesperson	3 May 2021	Online
21	Journalist 2 reporting on Shan State	9 Jan. 2022	Online
22	Commander, Karenni Nationalities Defense Force	31 Dec. 2021	Online
23	Commander of PDF unit in Karen National Union-controlled area, 9 Jan. 2022, online	9 Jan. 2022	Online
24	Commander, PDF unit Chauk Township, Magwe Region	4 Jan. 2022	Online
25	Journalist 3	2 Jan. 2022, 4 Jan. 2022	Thailand
26	Civil society leader and NUC advisor	3 Jan. 2022	Thailand
27	Fundraising activist	1 Jan. 2022	Thailand
28	Kachin party leader	17 April 2021	Online
29	Journalist 4, reporting on Rakhine State	23 April 2021	Online
30	Journalist 5, reporting on ethnic affairs	10 April 2021	Online
32	Civil society member focused on ethnic conflict	15 April 2021	Online
33	Foreign consultant 1 working with ethnic minorities	23 March 2021	Online
34	Ta'ang politician, Ta'ang Political Consultative Committee member	11 Jan. 2022	Online
35	Civil society LGTB activist	22 Sept. 2022	Online
36	Commander of PDF unit Pale Township, Sagaing Region	22 Dec. 2022	Online
37	Leading member of PDF unit Khin-U Township, Sagaing Regio	24 Dec. 2022	Online
38	Leading member of PDF unit Taze Township, Sagaing Region,	12 March 2023	Online
39	Member of Kachin PDF unit Laiza, Kachin State	18 Dec. 2022	Online
40	Female member of Kachin PDF unit in Laiza, Kachin State	18 Dec. 2022	Online
41	Female member of Kachin PDF unit in southern Kachin State	23 Dec. 2022	Online
42	Chin National Front captain, Hakha Township, Chin State	12 Feb. 2023	Online
43	Chin veteran rights activist	16 Sept. 2022	Online

## APPENDIX

44	Leading member of PDF unit Kantbalu Township, Sagaing Region	2 Feb. 2022	Online
45	Burman dissident and former All-Burma Students Front member, based in KIO-controlled area	2 Nov. 2022	Online
46	Foreign consultant 2 working with ethnic minorities	3 Nov. 2022	Online



# Appendix 2 - Sample interview guide

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The interviews I conducted included a range of respondents from different ethnic backgrounds, areas, and organizations, with varying relations to the movement. Moreover, interviews tended to focus on specific issues or areas that some of the interviewees were involved with. Below, based on my interview transcripts, I give an impression of these conversations by providing an overview of the themes and sort of questions that I raised for the different types of interviewees I spoke with.

## **Civil society member involved with the movement/ethnic resistance organization(s)**

- How did your organization become involved with the protest mobilization?
- What role did your organization play in creating (local/national) protest networks?
- What sort of mobilization techniques and messages did you deploy to motivate participation. and coordinate protests?
- How did the demands of the protest movement develop in the area you were mobilizing?
- How did your organization join in building a coalition with other CSOs and protest groups, the NLD and/or EROs?
- What were some of the discussion points during coalition formation and the formulation of shared goals of the movement actors?
- What position did your organization take on contention against the army when protest escalated armed resistance?
- What has been your organization's role in resistance by the movement since escalation?

## APPENDIX

- How has your organization been involving governance services such as humanitarian aid, education etc.?
- How has it cooperated with other movement actors and communities to enable these services and projects?

### **Ethnic resistance organization representative**

- What political position has your organization adopted since the coup and how does it relate to the protest movement?
- How has conflict with the army in your region developed since the coup?
- What position has your organization taken on the protest groups in your region, and have you publicly supported or contacted these groups?
- How have you engaged with the national unity coalition and what are your main political aims and positions in this process?
- How have you helped develop the Federal Democratic Charter and how (dis)pleased are you with its final content?
- How are you involved with the NUG cabinet creation and/or partnering with it?
- How have you worked with the NUG in terms of armed strategy?
- What are your relations with the new defense forces in your ethnic areas and (why) did you support their training?
- What are your relations with the new defense forces in Burman areas and (why) did you support their training?

### **National Unity Government members**

- Can you explain how the different opposition actors came together to form a national unity coalition after the initial protest waves?
- Who were the new protest groups and civil society that drove coalition formation, and how did the established political organizations like the NLD and EROs become involved in the process of creating the NUG with them?
- Can you explain how the Federal Democratic Charter were formed – how was it negotiated and who were the stakeholders?

- What were the positions of the different stakeholders going into the FDC negotiations?
- Can you explain the different contents and aim of part 1 and 2 of the FDC, and who mainly structured these parts?
- How do the NUG, EROs and other movement actors plan to develop the FDC into a constitution?
- How was the NUG cabinet comprised, and its line up decided?
- How do the NUG and EROs work together in terms of armed resistance strategy?
- Can you explain which ethnic groups have opted out and why? I.e. why did the Shan, Mon, Rakhine, Ta'ang and several other EROs, ethnic parties and elites declined to join?
- Why did you personally agree to join the NUG?

#### **National League for Democracy lawmakers**

- Can you explain how you understand the development of the CRPH and the NUG, and what was your knowledge of/involvement with these developments as an MP?
- Why do you think the NLD/CRPH was able to come together with various ethnic resistance organizations and movement activists in a broad coalition whereas before the coup there were divisions?
- What was your role during the protest phase of the movement?
- What was the NLD/CRPH's influence on the early protest phase of the movement in your constituency?
- How did the movement turn to arms in your constituencies?
- What was the response of local NLD MPs like yourself?
- How did the NLD/CRPH (in the NUG) influence this turn of events (or not)?
- What is the relation between the CRPH (in the NUG) and NLD MPs, to what extent to the NLD MPs work to support NUG measures?
- How does this uprising differ from past episode of mobilization against the military that involved the NLD?

## APPENDIX

### **New defense forces in Burman areas, ethnic areas**

- When did your PDF first form and what events caused people in your community to form the PDF?
- Who were among the first PDF organizers and leaders, and how did they organize resistance?
- How did the PDF member came to know and trust each other?
- When the PDF first started, what were the necessary things needed to survive and operate? And who were the main sources of support at the beginning?
- How did you gain access to ethnic resistance organizations for military support?
- How important are online donations for your resistance?
- What are your groups' relations with the NUG and its political goals?
- What are your groups' relations with EROs and their political goals?

#### *On a personal level:*

- What were you doing before the coup and how did you become involved in the protests?
- How were you affected by military pression? And how did you decide to join armed resistance and learn to use arms to fight?
- How did you find out how you can join or organize armed resistance?
- Why do you think did so many Generation Z protestors have taken up arms?

# Svensk sammanfattning

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Mobilisering av rörelser mot en global trend av autokratisering har ökat under de senaste åren och pekar på ett stort behov av att förstå hur sådana kamper för att skydda eller främja demokrati kan utvecklas. Sociala rörelser har länge varit en kraftfull form av kollektiv politisk kamp som engagerar stora delar av samhället. Demokratirörelser använder ofta icke-våld som ett effektivt sätt att utmana auktoritära regimer, och denna strategi har utforskats ingående. Vad som händer när sådana kraftfulla enande och mobiliserande processer möts av ett intensifierat förtryck från en etablerad regim är dock mindre väl förstått. Detta ”bestraffningspussel” är fortfarande föremål för vetenskaplig forskning eftersom förtryckets effekter kan variera från att undertrycka protester, intensifiera icke-våld eller eskalera en rörelse till väpnat motstånd.

En liten andel icke-våldsrörelser under de senaste decennierna har eskalerat till ett fullskaligt väpnat uppror som svar på förtryck, t.ex. den demokratirörelser under den arabiska vårens i Syrien, Jemen och Libyen. Hur rörelser eskaleras till uppror är fortfarande dåligt utrett eftersom drivkrafterna bakom en övergång till väpnad taktik ofta varierar från rörelse till rörelse. En annan underutforskad strategi för att få en rörelse att ta strid handlar om att skapa styrelseskick som kan ersätta auktoritärt styre över civilbefolkningen. Medan ett växande forskningsfält har fokuserat på aspekter av ”rebellstyre”, har sådana studier sällan undersökt styrning i inbördeskrig där en koalition av rörelsestyrkor står för styret. Frågan om hur en demokratirörelse kan eskalera till uppror och etablera ett styre förtjänar därför större vetenskaplig uppmärksamhet.

Avhandlingen behandlar denna fråga genom att studera fallet Myanmar och syftar till att förklara hur proteströrelsen Spring Revolution mot militärregimen i landet övergick till väpnat motstånd och skapade ett styre. För att fånga och analysera ett så brett fenomen bygger avhandlingen på teori och begrepp från studier av kontroversiell politik och sociala rörelser. Empiriska data har samlats in genom omfattande intervjuer med deltagare i rörelsen och ett brett urval av sekundära källor. Avhandlingen består av segmenterad undersökning som omfattar fyra separata tidskriftsartiklar, vars resultat sammanfattas i kappan och presenteras här. Min forskning om Myanmarrörelsen gav följande

huvudsakliga resultat, vilka bidrar till att förklara dess utveckling i termer av nyckelprocesserna koalitionsbildning, upptrappning till väpnat motstånd och skapandet av storsystem.

Militärkuppen utgjorde ett plötsligt, kollektivt hot för olika oppositionsaktörer och skapade en gemensam känsla av allmän upprördhet, vilket blev en omvälvande händelse för Myanmar's etniskt splittrade samhälle. En framväxande icke-våldsrörelse tog fasta på denna känsla, med kampanjbudskap som utformade en pluralistisk kollektiv identitet för "folket" i Myanmar. Kampanjens uppmaningar till handling kanaliserade också ilska och moralisk chock till ett utbrett deltagande i protester och solidaritet i en bred koalition mot militären. Studien visade att kampanjbudskapen var effektiva genom att skapa en ny rörelseidentitet som vädjade till det kollektiva minnet av det tidigare militärstyret och de senaste erfarenheterna av demokrati och politiskt inflytande, samtidigt som den också erkände etniska minoriteters marginalisering och politiska kamp för självstyre. I detta avseende byggde kampanjbudskapen i hög grad på nya politiska idéer, praktiker och identiteter som hade utvecklats i samhället under den senaste tidens demokratiska öppning.

Den omfattande rörelsen drevs till stor del av det progressiva civilsamhället och nya politiska gräsrotsgrupper såsom lokala strejkkommittéer, strejkande tjänstemän, studentföreningar och ungdomsgrupper. Studien visade hur dessa grupper uppmuntrade de etablerade politiska aktörerna i det Burmandominerade, avsatta National League for Democracy och fyra etniska motståndsorganisationer att övervinna sina politiska skiljelinjer och enas om målet att ersätta juntan med en federal demokrati. Denna löst organiserade koalition bildade en nationell samlingsregering för att leda rörelsen och tillämpade olika konfliktstrategier som riktade in sig på militärens statliga auktoritet, legitimitet och ekonomiska resurser. Studien förklarade hur protesterörelsen på så sätt lyckades samla nya och etablerade oppositionella krafter, inklusive väpnade aktörer, i en aldrig tidigare skådad nationell koalition med en stark kollektiv identitet och framväxande politiska institutioner, som kunde mobilisera genom olika nätverk, resurser och repertoarer.

Statens dödliga tillslag mot den populära protestkampanjen blev en annan utlösande händelse som fördjupade allmänhetens upprördhet och satte rörelsen på en upptrappningsbana, då vissa protestgrupper i avlägsna områden organiserade improviserat självförsvar. Bilder av detta motstånd och stödjande kampanjbilder delades på sociala medier av gräsrotsaktivister som motiverade upptrappningen som ett nödvändigt svar för att skydda rörelsen, samtidigt som de kanaliserade allmänhetens upprördhet mot interetnisk solidaritet och

koalitionssamarbete. Forskningen visade att självförsvarsgrupper sedan bildade lokala väpnade motståndsenheter genom att mobilisera viktiga grundläggande resurser i samhällsnätverk och få tillgång till externt militärt stöd från etniska motståndsorganisationer inom koalitionen. Den väpnade repertoar som dessa "early risers" var pionjärer för spreds inom den nationella rörelsen genom dess digitala kampanj, varefter rörelsens ledare antog den som den huvudsakliga motståndsstrategin. De nya motståndsstyrkorna, tillsammans med etablerade politiska och väpnade oppositionsaktörer, ökade på detta sätt samarbetet och mobiliserade resurser inom rörelsens nätverk för att genomföra ett löst samordnat uppror på landsbygden i Myanmar.

Vid sidan av de väpnade striderna för att vinna territoriell kontroll skapade rörelsen en politisk process och ett avgörande gemensamt utrymme för den breda koalitionen att etablera nya statliga institutioner och lokal styrning, enligt studien. De viktigaste aktörerna i koalitionen förhandlade fram en överenskommelse om en interimregering som kunde dra nytta av rörelsekoalitionens starka offentliga legitimitet och gemensamma resurser för att effektivt göra anspråk på statlig auktoritet och utveckla en civil administration. Att institutionalisera en bred rörelsekoalition till en nationell stat som löser långvariga frågor om federal maktindelning är dock mycket utmanande. Som ett resultat misslyckades utvecklingen av en centralregering, och rörelsen utvecklade styrning starkast på subnationell nivå. På denna regionala nivå urskiljde studien tre olika styrningsmönster. I burmanska områden uppstod en mycket lokal myndighet och civil administration som dominerades av nya krafter inom rörelsen. I vissa etniska områden lyckades stora etniska motståndsorganisationer utöka sin styrande myndighet och civila tjänster, medan små etniska motståndsorganisationer samarbetade med nya motståndsstyrkor för att gemensamt bilda en begynnande federal statsregering.

Avhandlingens resultat om Myanmarrörelsens upptrappning och styrning ger kunskapsbidrag som stärker litteraturen om kontroversiell politik, teori om sociala rörelser, relationen mellan stat och samhälle samt inbördeskrig. Studien erbjuder ett brett och nytt bidrag genom att belysa hur en proteströrelse kan enas för att organisera väpnat motstånd, vilket är en eskaleringsbana som fortfarande är dåligt förstådd. Studien förbättrar också vår förståelse för hur rörelser kan eskalera genom att ge nya insikter i hur vanliga demonstranter kan samarbeta med redan existerande väpnade organisationer för att starta omfattande motstånd. Avhandlingen fördjupar förståelsen av mikronivåprocesser för högriskmobilisering och visar att en stark identifikation med en rörelsens pluralistiska kollektiva identitet och demokratiska mål kan få individer att först protestera och sedan försvara rörelsen och stödja dess uppmaningar till motstånd när förtrycket slår till.

Avhandlingen visar vidare att en demokrätirörelse kan erbjuda ett viktigt gemensamt politiskt utrymme för en koalition av nya och etablerade oppositionsaktörer för att etablera styre under en ny statsstruktur som syftar till att ersätta auktoritärt styre.

Sammantaget visar avhandlingens resultat att nationella demokrätirörelser har en enorm potential att utmana etablerade auktoritära regimer. En proteströrelse kan skapa inkluderande kollektiva identiteter, nya politiska berättelser och demokratiska mål som kan mobilisera ett etniskt splittrat samhälle och förena oppositionen i en bred koalition som bedriver kollektiv politisk kamp. Enligt studien är en rörelse särskilt motståndskraftig mot förtryck om dess mobiliseringskampanj kan bygga på identiteter, politiska praktiker och idéer, samt strukturer i civilsamhället som formats av en period av politisk öppenhet och demokrätisering under senare tid. En sådan period av demokrätisering stärker således möjligheterna för breda, övergripande rörelsekampanjer mot auktoritära regimer.

Även om detta argument kan belysa olika rörelser som utsätts för förtryck, fokuserar jag på nationella rörelser i ett land som har etablerat väpnade motståndsgupper, vilka kan ingå i rörelsens breda paraply. När en sådan bred koalition möts av förtryck kan den öka samarbetet mellan sina nätverk för att inleda ett folkligt uppror och bygga en ny stat, snarare än att splittras eller fragmenteras under upptrappingen, vilket ofta sker och som en auktoritär regim hoppas kunna uppnå. Detta argument bidrar till vetenskapliga debatter om sociala rörelsers motståndskraft och eskaleringsvägar genom att visa hur en period av politisk öppenhet på senare tid kan påverka en mobiliseringskampanjs svar på statligt förtryck.