Resisting the Return of Military Rule: Coalition Building, Armed Struggle and Governance by Myanmar's Spring Revolution Movement

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Abstract
Social movements are a powerful form of collective struggle for democratic change that often involves a strategy of 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 underexamined. 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

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