The growing education gap in Chin State in Post-Coup Myanmar

On 1\textsuperscript{st} February 2021, the Burmese Military –known as the Tatmadaw– staged a coup d'etat and arrested the elected Government. The State Counsellor, Aung San Su Kyi, remains in prison and faces a range of spurious criminal charges. The elected government in exile, known now as the National Unity Government continues to run a “parallel” administration. The coup that happened amid the worsening Covid-19 emergency in Myanmar has broadened an already deep educational crisis in Chin state.

Khai Ring - 1\textsuperscript{st} September, 2021

Six months on since the coup, the willingness of the new junta, the State Administrative Council (SAC) to kill, maim and detain children continues to be truly shocking. As of June, The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) has put the figure of child fatality at 72, this figure includes 18 year olds and younger. Eleven out of the 72 deaths have been as a result of gun-shot wounds to the head, indicating an indiscriminate approach to sniper fire during rallies and protests.

\textit{Over 1000 children have been detained} and \textit{two have had death sentences} put upon them, charged with killing a supporter of the military. Trials associated with the death penalty are conducted under martial law provisions imposed in March which transferred executive and judicial power to regional military commands and therefore lack fair procedure.

The majority of these killings have been at protest sites in Yangon and Mandalay. According to the AAPP, two children have been killed in Shan, one in Kayah, one in Mon State and, three children have been confirmed dead in Chin State. However, the figures relating to child death at the hands of the SAC are likely to be much higher, given the difficulty of data collection in ethnic areas where ages of those who have been killed by military artillery and air strikes remain unconfirmed.
Crimes committed toward children are some of the most visceral and obscene acts perpetrated by the Junta and will be etched into the state consciousness. Adding to this are the countless more children deprived of medical care and lacking access to education. The UN Child Rights Committee has raised concerns that an entire generation of children are being damaged by the current crisis.

**Rejection of state education**

In Chin State, often cited as the poorest and least developed within Myanmar, education, or lack of it, has always been a human rights concern. The coup, coupled with the Covid-19 lockdowns which began last year mean that children in Myanmar have now been over a year and a half without schooling. In parts of Chin State, such as Paletwa Township, disruptions to children’s education and school closures have been prevalent for over four years. This has the potential to leave a dearth of formally educated children growing up in Chin State.

When on June 1 the SAC ordered schools to reopen across the country, 90 percent of children failed to attend. Parents pledged not to send their children to the junta’s schools, rallying behind the slogan: “No need for military slave education”. Teachers remained committed to the nationwide strike campaign, Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and many schools in Chin State continued to be occupied by Junta forces.

In Chin State, the situation regarding education during this time is linked inextricably to the notion of revolution. Out of 1,515 government schools in the state with a total of 9,667 teachers, over 4000 have been dismissed by the SAC for joining CDM. When schools opened, no children attended from Kanpetlet, Mindat, Tonzang and Thantlang Townships.

The rejection by teachers and unwillingness of Chin society to learn in an environment run by the SAC is long standing. The education system has long been seen to be of colonial imposition in some way, a tool of suppression and marginalization under the cultural assimilation processes of “burmanization”.
Chin State’s academic performance statistics prove that the national education system does not benefit a part of the country which has at least 35 indigenous languages. The inability to teach in the varied mother tongue dialects, coupled with chronic lack of funding and poor educational infrastructure has resulted in communities in Chin State being at the lowest end of educational attainment in the country, based on the state matriculation system. After 2015, pass rates fluctuated between 14 and 21 percent, well below the national average of 33 percent.

Education as a key sphere of disobedience to Bamar-dominated central government is therefore well-rooted. The Chin Defence Force - Mindat (CDF), the militia made up of the indigenous population of the Township who have taken up arms against the SAC, have made it clear how any school attendance and adherence to the SAC state education system will be viewed. This is very much in line with the inferences made by the deputy Minister for Education under the “parallel” NUG government who stated that teachers not willing to be part of the CDM “lack moral strength”:

“Since the coup all the CSO activities have stopped. The teachers, some of them are striking, some of them have had arrest warrants put upon them, some might be fleeing, also, the place where many communities reside are not safe, so they are trying to hide and fleeing to save [their] lives. Education is kind of secondary to all of this,” explains Salai Tuan Min, a civil society leader from Chin State.

While teachers engaged in CDM are having arrests warrants put upon them and continue to risk their liberty for the moral stance they are taking, any programme which a CSO or private education facility may provide would also be a dangerous undertaking:

“No one is giving education training, if a CSO was to run a training when the SAC is not able to reopen the schools, they [the junta] will hunt us. There are some CDM teachers that would be willing to provide those kind of educational activities, but we are not safe to do that,” continues Tuan Min.
A generational education gap

1st of August marked the 6 month anniversary of the coup. Schools continue to be occupied by Tatmadaw Battalions, used as makeshift army basis, teachers are on the run, towns and villages have been evacuated across the state. And adding to an already dire situation, COVID-19 is sweeping through the northern townships. As of August, approximately 80 people have died from Covid-19 in Chin State and over 2000 have been tested positive since Feburary. Providing breathing apparatus for the more serious cases is extremely challenging due to the crippled healthcare system and difficulties in humanitarian access.

It is impossible to predict where the standoff between the military junta and the opposition to it will end and what the end point will even look like. What may be easier to predict, is the effect of this situation will have on indigenous children, both psychologically and through the collective barrier this may present to the long-term development of the state. During the initial siege of Mindat Town in May and June, the Tatmadaw, while using schools as bases, targeted civilian infrastructure by bombing houses, arbitrarily detained and shot at civilians, used civilians as human shields and cut the electricity and water supply to the town which led to the forced displacement of over 10,000 people:

“Those who are supposed to be in school, are fleeing and hiding for their lives. They have minds that might be changed. It will be very difficult to change their minds back to going to school as normal. They will never be able to see schooling as a normal activity. They see the education, the school building, as a means of backing the military activity,” explains Salai Thawngsan, a researcher on educational policies in Myanmar.

Chin State does not have an abundance of natural resources, while various policy changes to land ownership and changing weather patterns have been cited as barriers to traditional livelihoods, such as shifting cultivation. Thus, education was seen by many to be a tool for Chin people to be in a better position to determine their own strategies for development in a democratic Myanmar.
As Salai Thawngsan explains: “Chin state is not like other places, we don’t have major resources, natural resources, and the long-term education has to be the way to a better future. Cutting off the education means breaking the whole future, without having the education in Chin State it is hard to live. In the past the people could do shifting cultivation, in the future, a lot of young people do not have the traditional knowledge, and what else will they do without education?”

The worry from some corners of Chin civil society is that due to the conflict, lack of education and inability to live off the land as had their fathers and mothers, migration to Malaysia, Thailand and India will be the inevitable path.

The potential for a new dawn?

Chin State is in a uniquely precarious situation at the present moment. This is both uniquely detrimental in the current circumstances but potentially uniquely beneficial moving forward, to add an extremely cautious sense of optimism in what otherwise is a truly dire situation.

As mentioned above, the education system is inextricably linked with the revolutionary mindset. So what are the options for the education system moving forward? Within the parallel government system, the NUG has outlined a basic education system for parents who don’t want to enroll their children at junta-controlled schools. The home-based learning syllabus will be offered both online and offline to allow wider student access. In the long term a new curriculum that supports the concept of federal democracy (as opposed to the current military junta-dominated system) is being designed. The education action plan also hints to the continuation of salary payment for teachers who are part of CDM.

However, according to Salai Thawngsan, the focus on online platforms for learning proposed by the NUG, such as zoom classes and downloadable lessons will not work in Chin State, due to poor internet connectivity and limited availability of electricity: “All those mechanism will not work in Chin State, that’s means we don’t have a safety net on education. We have CSOs but they cannot work, communication is very hard in Chin State, this makes our situation worse
than in other parts of the country. The NUG government is trying interim activities, their focus is online, focused on technology, and in a place like Chin State this is very difficult to access”.

As of now various the interim Chin National Consultative Council, formed by different Chin organizations resisting the military junta has not begun signaling any plans for tackling the education issue. The NUG, together with ICNCC must begin to focus on remote area learning, consulting with CDM teachers, civil society and planning for the future. If such activities are implemented, according to Thawngsan, the commitment that the NUG has made under a "no one left behind" slogan will be honored in the short term:

“Every community in Chin State, needs to think about how they will maintain the education of the children from the community. That might be the best scenario, otherwise we will not have hope for the future. Even CSOs from the religious community need to think about forming these kind of things. It will be difficult and we cannot do it in every village, but we need to choose the locations, where other villages can also have safe access.”

A phrase that has been popularized of late across social media is “it is always darkest before the dawn”. While the country presently seems to be at its darkest moment, the interim government, the NUG, together with the teachers of the CDM movement must be ready for when the dawn arrives. If an educational springboard is provided in a post-coup society, whenever that may take place, it must be robust enough to enable children to realize new opportunities and ways to rebuild.

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