

An Ethnic Reconciliation or Disguised Tensions?

A two-fold media analysis of the dynamics between majority and minority groups in Myanmar, the northernmost country of Southeast Asia, following the 2021 military coup d'état.

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Figure 1: Location of Myanmar in Asia

Abstract

This paper explores the dynamics between the Bamar majority and various minority groups in Myanmar as a result of the military coup in 2021. It analyses news sources and identifies patterns of discrepancies between the reporting of the majority-minority relationship by Western news organizations and local news sites that represent ethnic minorities. Further, the paper elucidates the lack of agency Western media awards to minority groups when reporting on their situation. Lastly, this paper illuminates the danger of discounting the voice of ethnic minorities and the need for reform in the methods of reporting news related to them.

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Introduction

The dynamics between majority and minority groups are constantly evolving and often change as a consequence of large-scale political transformations. This can result from revolutions, such as in the United States Civil Rights Movement (Skrentny 2002, 1) or, as in more recent history, coups d'état. Scholars have studied some links between minority and majority groups of rebels in Uganda and how they shape politics before and after military coups (Day 2011). This paper will focus on the media coverage of the consequences of the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, particularly, for minority groups. This paper focuses on the dynamics between the majority and minority groups in Myanmar, through the media's coverage of the military coup of 2021.

Most of the coverage of the coup has focused on the Bamar majority, which largely comprises both the military and the democratically elected government that it ousted, the NLD. What is less explored is the effect of the overthrow on the ethnic minorities in the country and its effect on their relationships with the NLD. Although Western media has proclaimed that the majority and minority groups in the conflict have reconciled as a result of the coup, my research will explore to what extent that is true and the true nature of the evolving relationship between these factions.

I argue that the way the local news sources and the Western media has reported the effect of the coup on the relationship between the minorities and the military has vast discrepancies. While Western and mainstream media reports the coup as resulting in a reconciliation of the

historical differences between the military and the ethnic armed organizations, the local media offers a more nuanced perspective. Unlike prominent Western news organizations, the local media sources do not group all the minorities as a united whole but instead explore each group's individual relationship with the military and response to the coup. However counterintuitive it may be a plethora of ethnic groups were hesitant to immediately condemn the takeover by the military which had discriminated against them for decades. My research aims to understand the layers of these dynamics.

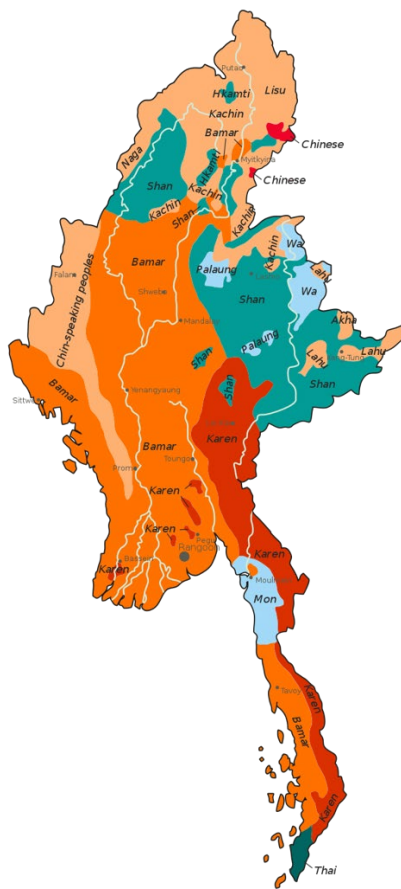


Figure 2: Ethnolinguistic map of Myanmar

As the coup constitutes a recent upheaval, scholarly articles have only just started to reach publication (Pedersen 2022; David, Kaung Myat and Holliday 2021; International Crisis Group 2021). In general, previously conducted research and literature based on it are essential to rely on because they analyze events and offer unique yet credible perspectives. I will draw on past research, but I will refer primarily to news articles to conduct my analysis. The benefit of looking to news sources is that newspapers report the occurrences while they are happening, providing a direct view of the divergent perspectives of the Western and the

local media. Unlike research papers that extensively analyze an occurrence with the benefit of hindsight, news agencies must report on an issue while it is happening, hence reflecting events as they happen, how they happen. Newspaper articles will tend to focus more on the facts of the event (the who, what, where, when and how) rather than scrutinizing or attempting to understand the causes (the why) of the incident. Although newspaper articles are often tainted by biases and the author's individual interpretation of events, they serve as a snapshot of the media's narrative and can be useful in uncovering these biases.

With this research paper, I will add to the existing literature on the matter and provide a novel outlook by throwing light on a previously unexplored outcome of the military coup, which is a shift in the undercurrents between the Bamar majority and the previously discriminated-against minorities in Myanmar. After analyzing data from the newspapers, I found considerable differences in the way the Western and local news sources depict these dynamics.

Literature Review on the Majority and Minority Groups in Myanmar

In 2021, the Tatmadaw (the military) suddenly and violently seized power from the NLD which had governed Myanmar for six years. The NLD's landslide victory in the 2020 elections prompted the military to denounce the results and proclaim that they were tainted by widespread fraud (Pedersen 2022, 235). This narrative justified the coup. Note that according to Kalyvas, "Civil wars are distinguished from coups when a certain fatality threshold is crossed, entailing significant military operations" (2006, 19). Although the magnitude of the upheaval in Myanmar allows it to be classified as a civil war, most sources refer to it as a coup.

The coup leaders insisted that the coup was not actually a coup; they propagated that the move to usurp the place of the government was a legitimate and temporary takeover, not a violent and unlawful overthrow, which is what other groups viewed it as. The military installed a puppet president, Myint Shwe, who subsequently announced a state of emergency in the state and transferred power to the Tatmadaw's commander-in-chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing (Pedersen 2022, 235). According to Pedersen, there was an attempt "to convene parliament without having dealt in good faith with the allegations of electoral fraud"

(2022, 236). A clause in the 2008 constitution of Myanmar allowed power to be transferred to the military during an emergency and hence these steps were taken¹. This unlawful power grab spurred hundreds of protests across the country.

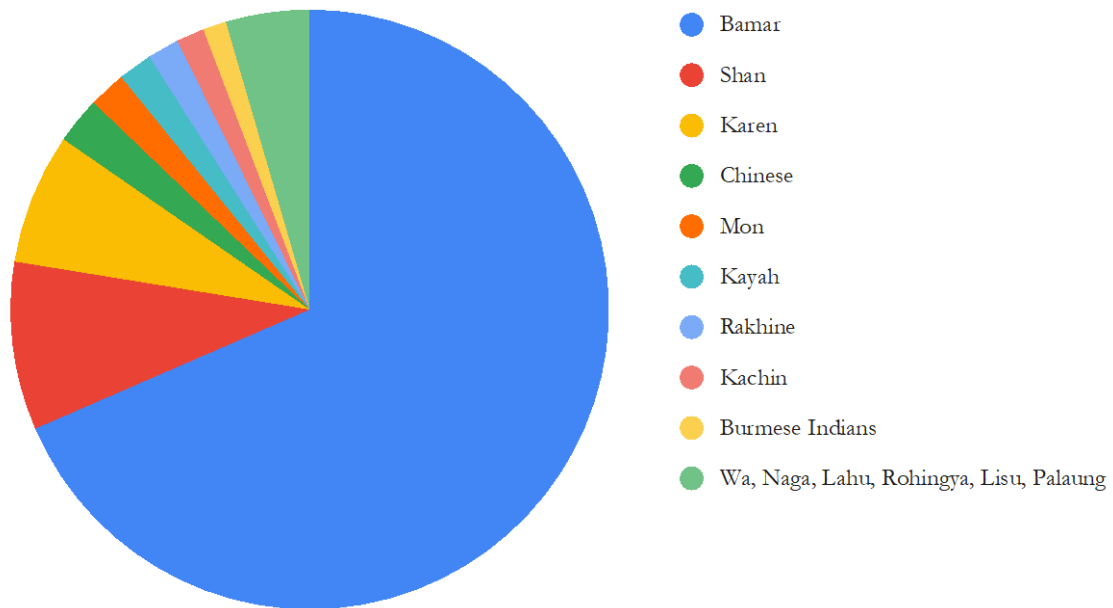
In their paper ‘Myanmar’s military coup and the elevation of the minority agenda?’, Thawngmung and Noah describe the protests against the coup as being widespread and a unifying force across citizens with diverse backgrounds (Thawngmung and Noah 2021, 300). However, they concede that everyone is not united in their opposition to the military and their call to reinstate Aung San Suu Kyi as the country’s leader. Ethnic minorities, who have for decades been oppressed by both the military and the NLD and have been fighting for their autonomy since Myanmar gained independence in 1948, are divided in their response to the coup. While some of the minorities view the coup as a democracy-defying occurrence that threatens to dampen their already deteriorated economic condition, others perceive it as a struggle for power between rival Bamar political elites, the military on one side and Suu Kyi’s party on the other (Thawngmung and Noah 2021, 301).

Since 2015, Myanmar has been a post-authoritarian state, free from the control of an authoritarian regime that denies its citizens political plurality. Different from other post-authoritarian regimes currently rising in Western societies, the coup in Myanmar did not necessarily take into account a certain appeal to minority groups (Pedersen 2021, 239). Suu Kyi’s party (the NLD) never felt the need to appeal to the minorities as they enjoyed the support of the fairly large Bamar majority, and thus have clashed several times with a plethora of minority groups (Thawngmung and Noah 2021, 303). Parties representing these ethnic minorities never stood a chance in elections which were governed by the first-past-the-post system that favored larger parties such as the NLD. Reducing their chances at success further is the fact that several ethnic minority political movements are divided into opposing coalitions, such as the military-condemning Arakan Army (AA) and the NLD-opposing Arakan National Party (ANP).²

¹ According to Pedersen: “The emergency provisions of the 2008 constitution (articles 417–18) permit the president, after co-ordinating with the NDSC, to declare a state of emergency and transfer power to the commander-in-chief under a variety of circumstances that are judged to constitute a threat, inter alia, to national sovereignty.” (Pedersen 2002, 251)

² Further examples of different political parties constituting the same ethnic group have been provided on page 307 of Thawngmung and Noah’s paper.

Rough estimate of distribution of ethnicities in Myanmar



Recently, however, the role of minorities has been changing. The Committee Representing the Pyi-daungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the leader of the anti-coup process, includes both ousted NLD leaders and ethnic minorities who have been brought to the forefront as a result of the coup. The turn of events has spurred the majority to offer a formal apology for their ignorance to violence inflicted on ethnic minorities by the military in the past (Thawngmung and Noah 2021, 306). According to Thawngmung and Noah, the Bamar population and the minorities are now learning to form an interdependent relationship, with the minorities providing a safe haven for protestors in the anti-coup movement. The CRPH has also formed an interim National Unity Government (NUG) with at least half of the ministers representing minorities.

David, Kaung Myat and Holliday agree with this perspective. In their paper, through an analysis of Facebook posts before and after the coup d'état, they found that the dynamics between the majority and ethnic minorities drastically improved as a result of the coup. The NLD government and its leader Aung San Suu Kyi, both earlier referred to the ethnic armed organizations as “insurgents” and “terrorists”; they completely changed their vocabulary after the coup, referring to the ethnic groups in a much more positive light by highlighting their role in bringing an end to the conflict. (David, Kaung Myat and Holliday 2022, 97-98).

While this may be an indication of the improving relationship between the NLD and the ethnic minorities, these armed groups have suffered generational persecution both at the hands of the NLD and the military. Ethnic leaders have in the past been deeply disappointed that the Bamar majority did not support them when the military was carrying out abusive campaigns against these groups (International Crisis Group 2021, 10).

I want to explore which of these above narratives is true or if the truth is a combination of both these perspectives, and how differently such views are reported by Western versus local news agencies.

Research Methods

I analyzed newspaper articles from mainstream sources such as the New York Times and the Associated Press.³ I also used 2 local news sources: the Karen News Organization and the Kachin News Group. The Karen and Kachin ethnic groups are two major minority groups involved in the conflict, and both have suffered from persecution at the hands of the Tatmadaw in the past. Through the analysis of ten chosen newspaper articles (4 from the Karen News Organization, 2 from the Kachin News Group, 2 from the New York Times and 2 from the Associated Press), I was able to identify opposing views not only on the coup d'état but also on the dynamics between the different groups involved in the conflict.

I conducted a citation analysis, but instead of counting the number of articles or mentions of a particular keyword, I looked past the numbers and qualitatively evaluated the articles that would substantially contribute to my research (Bryman 2016). I visited the website of the Karen News Organization, and I searched for keywords such as “NUG” (National Unity Government), “NLD” (National League for Democracy) and “minority(ies)” that were relevant to identify the position of the Karen National Union (KNU) with respect to the ethnic majority. I further filtered the results to include the articles that were most relevant to the timeline of the military coup, mostly focusing on the articles in and around 2021. Next, I

³ I had initially selected the Washington Post. However, on reading articles on their website, I noticed that their newspaper articles were mainly interested in observing the military coup in itself and didn't focus much on the dynamics between the minorities and other groups in the conflict. After skimming through 5 articles, I decided to take up the Associated Press for my analysis which had more articles that were relevant to my research.

visited the Kachin News Group website and similarly searched for terms related to my research there, such as “NLD”.

After exhausting these 2 resources, I turned to two Western media sites: the New York Times and AP News. On the New York Times website I searched for the term “Myanmar minority 2021” to help me filter through articles, while for AP News I searched for the phrase “Myanmar ethnic armed organizations after coup” to locate the articles I was looking for.

Similar to how David and Holliday used Facebook posts qualitatively to examine the evolving relationship between the majority and the minorities (David and Holliday 2022, 97-98), my paper works with widely read media sources to compare differences in the way that these newspapers convey information and highlight nuances. I identified articles appropriate for my research from all four of these websites and will analyze their reporting below.

Media Analysis on the Majority and Minority Groups in Myanmar

The Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was a contract made between the military’s proxy ‘Union Solidarity and Development Party’ (USDP) and certain minority groups. It was created to address the primary causes of armed insurgency in the country and to open a mode of dialogue between the military and the ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) (Thawnghmung and Noah 2021, 302). The USDP is considered to be on the same side as the military because the government comprised former high-ranking military officials who still held some influence over the army’s people; thus, this close relationship allowed the military to assume that the USDP would never take any action that would challenge the interests or authority of the military. These reasons enabled high expectations from the NCA in terms of strengthening the connection between the military and minority groups.

However, only eight out of twenty-one major armed groups signed the NCA by 2016, when the democratic government was established with Aung San Suu Kyi in power. Several organizations didn’t sign the NCA for a variety of reasons. For example, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the largest non-state armed group in Myanmar, rejected the NCA as they refused to accept anything short of complete autonomy and thus spearheaded the political movement of the non-signatories.

As a result, the minority groups in Myanmar became largely divided into two main categories: those who signed the NCA with the military and those who didn't. The NCA was drafted in 2015, which is when this divide between the groups became apparent. The former group are those who evolved to be the minority groups that actively denounced the military coup when it occurred in 2021. It includes groups like the Karen National Union (KNU) and the Restoration Council of Shan State (International Crisis Group 2021, 11). They joined the National Unity Government (NUG), which comprises elected lawmakers and members of parliament who were ousted in the coup, in speaking out against the putsch. The NUG is the democratic government in exile that operates within and outside Myanmar.

On the other hand, the latter group who did not sign the NCA are those who have larger military and financial reserves and hence, chose to wait for a better deal. These include the UWSA and the Kachin Independence Army, among others. These groups evolved to be the minority groups that were less committal about their response to the coup than the signatories of the NCA. While these groups did not express support for the coup, they did not express dissent either and, for the most part, remained neutral. They had held a fair amount of autonomy even before the coup and thus their muted reaction is not unexpected. Their response to the coup thus differs and was less reactionary than the first category of groups (Sun 2022).

Key NCA signatories	Key NCA non-signatories	Not offered NCA because of active fighting with military (aligned with non-signatories)
Karen National Union	United Wa State Army	Arakan Army
Restoration Council of Shan State	Kachin Independence Army	Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army
Karen National Defense Organization	Karenni National Progressive Party	Ta'ang National Liberation Army

Table 1: Coalitions grouped by allegiances (Thawngmung and Noah 2021).

It may be intuitive to think that the minority groups that have been oppressed by the military for decades must align themselves with the NUG and join the anti-coup movement. However, that is not the thought process for some of the ethnic armed groups who feel victimized by

both the government and the military. They consider the rivalry between the two to be a rivalry between two Bamar-dominated factions, each fighting their own battle, neither concerned about the wellbeing or interests of the minority groups. Such groups' response to the coup has been more of indifference than anything else as they see no role for themselves in the conflict.

While local news sources make the above distinction clear, Western media has tended to portray the minorities' reaction to the coup as a united one, which is far from the truth. Through this analysis, I will explore the evolving relationships of the minority groups with the NUG and the military and pick out discrepancies in the reporting on this subject.

Karen News Organization



The Karen News Organization comprises ethnically Karen reporters and writers and it focuses on key issues and instances that shape Karen communities around the world (Karen News 2020). After analyzing news articles published on the Karen News website from 2019 – 2021 (pre- and post-coup d'état), I took note of the news organization's reporting on the Karen minority groups' relationship with the NLD. Even before the military coup, the Karen National Union (KNU) had a tumultuous relationship with the democratically elected NLD. The first quote that demonstrates this is as below:

The arrest and jailing of the trio activists take place under the NLD government, a government that claims to be democratic and friend of the ethnic nationalities.

However, since taking power in 2015, the NLD seems to drift away from its professed

ideology and values and along the way *has also alienated ethnic minority groups with its authoritarian approach to political freedom and its friendly stance toward the Tatmadaw*. After almost five years in the office, ethnic minority groups have lost trust in the NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi and many of them can no longer differentiate between the NLD and the previously military-affiliated government. [emphasis added] (Moo 2019)

This outwardly perceived unity of the NLD and the Tatmadaw (the military) is significant because it reveals the attitude of ethnic minorities towards both of these parties before the coup. As these ethnic groups had suffered persecution at the hands of both Suu Kyi's government and the military, they felt victimized by both who they believed were working together (or had a "friendly stance" towards each other). Thus, ethnic groups, including the KNU, had a deep-rooted distrust in the NLD because of their seemingly conciliatory stand towards the military.

Through my analysis of news articles on the Karen News website, I noticed a repeated appeal to the international community to assist with reconciliation to resolve the conflict in the country, which ultimately remained silent and did not offer any tangible assistance to resolve the internal conflict in Myanmar (Pedersen 2022, 250). On February 14th 2021, less than two weeks after the coup, the KNU made a plea to the international community to put pressure for the release of unlawfully arrested citizens and "to create a forum for dialogue with the aim of achieving national reconciliation" between the military and government (Karen News 2021). This reveals the minority groups' desire to "make friends" with and gain support from the transnational community (Keck and Sikkink 1999, 91).

Once the reality of the coup settled in, much of the coverage of news on the Karen News website has been boldly anti-military. Focusing more on resolving the conflict at hand, the Karen News Organization describes the Karen ethnic groups' (including the KNU's) role in the anti-coup movement, even aligned with the NUG, which is comprised of former NLD officials who were ousted in the coup, in order to fight collectively against the Tatmadaw. However, this doesn't mean that the differences between the Karens and the NUG were over; it only means that they agreed to temporarily cooperate to fight against a common enemy.

To combat the anti-coup movement, the Tatmadaw has attempted time and again to pit the NUG, which was majority ethnic Bamar, against the ethnic minorities, to divide and weaken its opposition. According to a Yangon journalist, “The military have proven expert over the years at driving wedges between its opposition – ethnic or Bamar – and unfortunately, it always seems to work to their advantage (Karen News 2021).”

Although this statement is widely applicable to most actions of the military, this newspaper article specifically referred to a raid by the army on the Lay Kay Kaw village searching for anti-coup protestors and people linked to the People’s Defense Force.

It is clear to see that the military has been described as an “expert” in successfully pitting the ethnic groups against the NUG because of the past persecution that these groups have faced at the hands of Aung San Suu Kyi’s government. Because of these historical differences, it is not difficult for the military to cause a rift in the NUG (a successor of the pre-coup NLD) and the minority groups, both of which are temporarily united for the anti-coup cause but whose antagonism may weaken this unity.

Another instance of the Tatmadaw’s divisive tactic is clearly visible when the junta questioned Karen political party members about their affiliation with the NUG and compelled them to deny any form of support. The details of the event have been described in the following quotes:

“During the visit, members of the Karen parties were asked for their executive lists as well as personal information and if they issued a letter of support for the National Unity Government (NUG), according to a Karen party official.

... “We were unable to open an office due to the party’s limited financial position, so a party member was summoned to the General Administration Office and asked if we had issued any letter of support for the NUG. The person who was summoned had to sign a document confirming we didn’t issue any letter of support.” (Karen News 2021)

This is another instance of the Tatmadaw “driving a wedge” – in the words of the Karen News Organization – between the NUG and ethnic minorities, the Karen parties in this case

(Karen News 2021). By forcing the Karen parties to confirm that they did not issue a letter of support for the NUG, the military is deepening the gap between the minority group and the NUG. It may seem like a small move but the history of the conflict between the two parties may catalyze their falling out with each other. The Tatmadaw does not have to take much action. In fact, the military only needs to provide a small push and the divide will unfold automatically because of the inherent clashes between the NLD and the minorities, and the mutual distrust they harbor towards each other (Pedersen 2022, 245-246).

Articles on the Karen News website thus reflect the Karen group's and the NUG's combined opposition to the Tatmadaw during the coup. However, a deeper analysis into these articles discloses the historical grievances the Karen groups hold against the NUG which makes the opposition to the military's rule weak and in the long term, ineffective.

Kachin News Group



The Kachin News Group is an independent news agency that aims to provide high quality investigative and public service journalism through its online publication in three languages: Jinghpaw, Burmese and English.

Similar to the Karen News organization, the Kachin News Group also describes Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD's attitude towards the ethnic minorities before the coup as indifferent. An article from 2020 rebukes the NLD's outwardly democratic stand as follows:

Ethnic political parties have described a recent National League for Democracy (NLD) *statement about building a future federal democratic Union as “just words” that need to be put into practice.* The NLD released the statement on November 12 after winning the majority of seats in Burma's general election, held on November 8. They said that they expected cooperation from ethnic parties and that they shared a

vision of a “democratic federal” Burma; in response, ethnic parties have noted that in their own descriptions of a future system, the term ‘federal’ is always the first adjective, emphasizing the importance of self-determination. [emphasis added] (Kachin News Group 2020)

The ethnic minorities, the Kachins in this case, believed that the NLD’s promise of a federal democratic Union, on being elected, were “just words”, that it was only a façade and an empty promise that, considering the NLD’s general attitude towards the ethnic groups, would never materialize.

Duwa Gumgrawng Awng Hkam, who is deputy chairman of Kachin State People’s Party, told KNG of the NLD’s statement about building a federal democratic Union:

“These are just words. We need practice to implement it... We need to build a Union which grants coexistence among ethnic people. Ethnic people have suffered a lot.” (Kachin News Group 2020)

This Kachin State People’s Party spokesperson elucidates the Party’s stance of distrust in the NLD’s false promises. They see through the party’s attempts to garner support from the ethnic armed organizations and identify the lack of truth in the statement.

The Kachin State People’s Party later condemned the NLD’s move to establish an ethnic affairs committee and appoint an ethnic Kachin chair as a strategy to gain support in the general elections. This is a well-employed strategy in states where the ruling party’s authority is being increasingly questioned by the opposition – in this case, the military – and the civilians (Fazal 2010, 2). The following quote demonstrates this deep-rooted distrust the Kachin minority groups held in Suu Kyi’s party and its motives:

“In my opinion, they will use it when they launch their election campaign in ethnic regions and for winning in 2020 general elections,” KSPP vice-chairperson Duwa Gumgrawng Awng Hkam. “It won’t represent all ethnic people. I want other ethnic people to understand this. I think they needed to talk with ethnic political parties if they wanted to form this ethnic affairs committee. Therefore, I don’t think it will be effective,” he explained. (Kachin News Group 2020)

The Kachin State People's Party vice-chairperson once again sees through another one of the NLD's tactics to gather support for itself, this time before an upcoming election. While the democratically elected party claims that it will establish an ethnic affairs committee with an ethnic Kachin chair, Awng Hkam opines that launching such a committee is only a political strategy of the NLD and will not actually represent all ethnic people. He brings to light the underlying motive of the NLD when establishing such a committee which was formed without any conversation with the ethnic groups and thus is clearly only created to fulfil the NLD's personal agenda.

The Kachin News Group's newspaper articles reveal the high degree of dichotomy between the goals of the ethnic minorities and the Aung San Suu Kyi's government, hence revealing the deep-seated divide between the two sides. Conversely, the Western media views this clash as a thing of the past, as will be explored below.

The New York Times

The New York Times

The New York Times offers bold and unrealistically optimistic statements about the ethnic minorities' association with the NLD, such as the following assertion, referring to an effect of the aftermath of the coup:

Another transformation is quietly underway: a growing acceptance of the nation's ethnic diversity, something that was notably absent during an earlier political transition. With the military's violence unleashed once again, some are acknowledging that democracy cannot flourish without respecting the ethnic minorities who have endured decades of persecution. (Beech 2021)

By declaring the “growing acceptance of the nation’s ethnic diversity” in response to the coup, Hannah Beech of the New York Times, a senior correspondent based in Bangkok, undermines the differences that still exist between the NLD and the minorities and discounts the historical grievances the ethnic minorities had of Suu Kyi’s government by pronouncing the divide as bridged as a result of the coup d’état. Not being a local reporter, Beech can only make assumptions about the situation on the ground in Myanmar.

The same article makes extensive use of quotes from credible individuals to assert its point. Richard Horsey, a senior adviser on Myanmar for the International Crisis Group, told the United Nations Security Council:

“Myanmar stands at the brink of state failure, of state collapse.” But, Mr. Horsey added, Myanmar’s existential crisis in the wake of the coup has catalyzed a national reckoning on ethnicity that could lead to a more inclusive, cohesive country.

“In the midst of all this horror, the transformative nature of the resistance against the military has to be acknowledged and applauded,” he said. “A new generation of political action has emerged that has transcended old divisions and old prejudices and gives great hope for a future Myanmar that embraces, and is at peace with, its diversity.” (Beech 2021)

The New York Times writer evidently glorifies the effects of the coup. While the cooperation of the ethnic minorities with the NLD to combat the military is a move of reconciliation and a step towards a pluralistic democracy, to applaud the “transformative nature of the resistance against the military” is deeply overstating a consequence of the insurrection. It is, furthermore, premature to declare the arrival of a “new generation of political action” that has “transcended old divisions and old prejudices”. Note that the use of the past tense in this last quote is significant as it implies that the majority and minority in Myanmar have already reconciled, that their differences have been erased and that they are at peace with one another. The Karen News Organization and Kachin News Group’s descriptions of their grievances against the NLD evidence the fallaciousness of the New York Times presumptions.

The article further quotes U Khin Zaw Win, a political analyst and former political prisoner who has long pushed for the rights of ethnic groups in Myanmar, when he said:

“The blood that has been shed in the aftermath of the coup has brought about a sea change in public views on federalism and inclusion.” (Beech 2021)

The New York Times chose this quote to support their optimistic hypothesis. However, other writings of Zaw Win reveal that this was not always his thought process. The following quotes have been taken from articles written by him and published on the website of Open Democracy, an independent international media platform. These disclose a completely different opinion.

“There has been an uncanny consistency between the NLD’s term in office since it was elected in 2015 and the preceding term under the country’s military-backed party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party. The NLD has claimed that the military continued to exert a strong influence and its hands were tied. This is only true to a certain extent, and there is a lot that the NLD could have done but did not.

“...Although Suu Kyi continued the peace process with much fanfare, she failed to pay attention to the key demand from ethnic groups – real, and not nominal, autonomy.” (Win 2021)

One can easily see how the New York Times has cherrypicked the quote which favored its prediction and ignored others by the same individual who earlier agreed with the ethnic communities that felt marginalized.

Hannah Beech, in the same New York Times article, also boldly declares the following:

“For the first time in the country’s history, the National Unity Government, as the shadow authority is called, has openly endorsed federalism rather than a centralized authority. A constitution that enshrines federalism could help free ethnic minorities from the Bamar supremacy that has dominated politics in Myanmar since the country was founded in 1948.” (Beech 2021)

However, previous quotes from the Kachin News Group divulge that the Kachin State People’s Party viewed the NLD’s previous promises of establishing a “federal democratic

Union” as “just words” that did not have the backing of implementation. After analyzing the Myanmar coup through different angles, I am of the opinion that since the promise of federalism did not spur action in the past, there is no reason to believe that it would now.

The newspaper once again mentions the heightened possibility of reconciliation among the Bamar majority and minority groups in Myanmar as a result of the putsch.

And the public, having recently endured great brutality at the hands of the military, now seems more sympathetic toward the aspirations of ethnic communities that have experienced repression for decades. (Zin 2021)

While the New York Times acknowledges the “sympathy” the majority feels towards the ethnic minorities, it fails to consider the disengagement the minorities likely face from both the groups which have previously ignored the interests of the ethnic armed groups. The rash assumption is that these ethnic groups will gladly accept the majority’s support, ignoring their past differences.

By denying these minorities any agency and reporting only from the perspective of the majority, the New York Times belittles the minorities, painting them as helpless victims who are only waiting for the majority to acknowledge their plight and come to their rescue. The reality is, as one has learned from the reports of the local news organizations namely the Karen News Organization and the Kachin News Group, that each minority is a flourishing entity in itself, each of which has a voice and is capable of using it. Reducing them to a unanimous whole robs them of agency and diminishes their perspective.

AP News

The logo for Associated Press (AP) news, consisting of the letters 'A' and 'P' in a bold, sans-serif font.

Several articles on the Associated Press News website, an independent American news organization headquartered in New York, portray the ethnic armed organizations in Myanmar and the NUG as united and fighting against the military together. The quote below, elaborating on growing protests against the Tatmadaw, illustrates this misleadingly depicted unity:

People from Myanmar’s ethnic minority groups, who are concentrated in far-flung, border states, joined in – a striking show of unity in a country where some groups have resented the Burman majority’s control and have also had their differences with Suu Kyi. But their deep mistrust of the military, which has brutally repressed their armed struggles for more autonomy, has made them uneasy allies with her party. (AP News 2021)

This quote is much more balanced than the previously examined ones of the New York Times. The AP News acknowledges the differences the minorities had with Suu Kyi and illustrates the reason of their alliance with her party. By proclaiming their allegiance as “uneasy”, the article offers a more equalized view than just overarchingly announcing the coalition.

The same article also includes the following quote which displays a personal account of an activist. In this case, the Karen ethnic group is one that has been aligned with the NUG, as seen in articles on the Karen News website which consistently condemn the military and support the anti-coup movement.

“Our people have been oppressed by the junta for many years. They have cracked down brutally. How long are they going to keep doing this?” asked protester Naw Ohn Hla, a human rights activist from the Karen ethnic group, at a demonstration in Yangon. “But the people understand the situation, and most of them are joining now.” (AP News 2021)

Another Associated Press article takes this claim forward and paints the NLD as an organization that was on the same side as the minorities and whose election win was indicative of the coming peace for these ethnic groups. We know from the reporting of the

representatives of ethnic armed organizations earlier (the Karens and the Kachins) that this is false and the minorities' relationship with the NLD before the military coup was turbulent.

When democratic reforms began in 2011, unilateral cease-fire agreements were signed by several groups, with others signing additional cease-fires in the years that followed. In 2015, a nationwide National Cease-fire Agreement was formed, with many ethnic leaders and government officials signing on. Further hope for peace came with Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy party winning the 2015 election, even though civilian control of the government still was limited by an army-drafted constitution. (Milko 2021)

One can notice from the local news sources' account of the evolving relationship between the NLD and the minority groups that Suu Kyi's party winning the election may not have been an indication of "further hope for peace" but only striking resemblance with the calm before a storm.

While the Associated Press News offers relatively more balanced accounts than the New York Times, it also includes certain inaccuracies with respect to the dynamics between the ethnic minorities and the NLD before the coup d'état.

Conclusion

My research concludes that the Karen News organization and Kachin News Group have reported events giving the minorities significant agency. On the other hand, the Western news groups – such as the New York Times and the Associated Press – have tended to minimize the voice of the ethnic groups, portraying them as only victims of circumstance and oppression. Western and mainstream media have also depicted an unnaturally optimistic view of the situation in Myanmar. Speaking of the reconciliatory powers of the coup and the recognition by the ethnic majority of the persecution faced by the minorities, these reports assume that the minorities are a united whole with one ideology who are ready to accept the sympathy of the majority whom they will now unfailingly join in their fight against the military. Such an assumption is not only derogatory, but it is also dangerous as it undermines the power and role of the minorities in the conflict as a whole.

Although on the surface it does seem like the majority and the minorities are reconciling, conclusions must not be jumped to, and the past must not be ignored. It may have been temporarily ignored to focus on the larger threat at hand, but it definitely should not be forgotten.

Although a resolution to the conflict may seem difficult, I believe assistance from the international community would help immensely. Pedersen explains that "to be fair though, it is, of course, very difficult for international actors to do very much to help when the domestic protagonists seem bent on mutual destruction" (Pederson 2022, 250). I dare to disagree with him to a certain extent. International Organizations are still able to raise the awareness for the plight of the minorities in Myanmar and help bring justice to the groups that have faced persecution for. A third pair of eyes in the coup d'état can undoubtedly help to support the cause of less favored organizations and support them in achieving their goal.

While some previous research has been conducted in the field related to the after-effects of the Myanmar coup, there is not yet enough research analyzing the intricacies of the majority-minority dynamics and the discrepancies in Western reporting on the matter. The uniqueness of the focus of this paper and the methodology used to arrive at its conclusion make it critical and relevant.

My paper has clarified the prominent role of the minorities in the conflict and analyzes the way news pertaining to them was reported. Other scholars can continue to analyze such research or interview agents in the field to understand the reality of these groups more deeply and the relationships among them. The citation analysis I have employed can be replicated easily by other scholars aiming to understand the role of media in post-authoritarian regimes; the scope of my research is narrow, but other scholars can take it forward and apply it to a broader canvas to obtain more widely applicable results. Deeper research can also be conducted into the implications of the coup for each ethnic armed organization individually.

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