



Ruptured space allows Myanmar youths to reimagine a new education system

Tharaphi Than

Since the February coup, students in Myanmar have emerged as the invisible leaders of the resistance. They are boycotting the prevailing university education system and envisioning an alternative education site, free from institutional bureaucracies, disciplinary hierarchies, and a gate-keeping mentality. One proposed model is the Virtual Federal University (VFU), led by members of the Yangon University Students' Union (UYSU), which aligns well with the decolonial methodologies, the new thematic curriculum development, and collaborative education model of the IAS Humanities Across Borders (HAB) program.

The February 1st coup in Myanmar is the single most destructive force in recent years, one that destroyed everything built during the nascent democratic period between 2011 and 2021. For many minority areas, particularly Kachin and Karen, it was the third tragedy—the first two being the 70-year-old civil war and COVID-19—that denied hope that all the war refugees and the internally might return home and rebuild lives. The Bamar majority on the plains now shares the collective suffering that dominated the highlands throughout the 20th century.

There is profound sadness and outrage; misery and shame; bewilderment and hopelessness. Amidst all this mix of intense feelings, many also have realized that there arrived a ruptured space, like a fertile ground after a volcano eruption, where new lives sprout, rising like the proverbial phoenix. It will be sheer romanticism and even an insensitive intellectual exercise to extol the coup as a harbinger of new things. Nevertheless, the coup teaches both Myanmar and the world many lessons, and youth are showing us how to collectively reset the old and corrupt system, by daring to seize the opportunity of the open space of rupture.

As this article goes to press in July 2021, young people are at the forefront of the resistance movement that is still unfolding five months after the coup. They continue to mobilize flash protests in cities, to undergo military training in Ethnic Armed Organizations-controlled areas (such as Karen, Karenni, and Kachin regions), and, more importantly, to educate the public that two popular options—reinstating the Aung San Suu Kyi-led government or striving for piecemeal progress under the military—are both untenable. Initially rejected by the majority of the population pre-coup, many radical nation-building ideas of the youth are now in circulation among the general public. To youths, federal democracy, not diarchic democracy' espoused by the National League for Democracy (NLD) nor disciplined democracy endorsed by the army, is the path towards unity between Bamars and minorities, towards stability for both Bamar-dominated heartlands and minorities' highlands, towards equity for all and prosperity for both elites and the oppressed.

The military tends to portray youth activists as naive and easily influenced by the political parties, particularly by the leftists. The NLD, on the other hand, treats youth activists as troublemakers, constantly challenging the authority and the status quo. The international community frame them

as 'the unrealistic', daring to challenge the unchallengeable. Nevertheless, it is the youth who dare to talk back to the military, the NLD, and the international community. As drivers of the revolution, they have unfettered hopes for the country. Their goals are not means-adjusted, nor is their vision limited by material resources or available international support. The many unpopular slogans they created in February have captured the public's imagination since June. Radical claims such as 'Uproot the Fascist Army', 'Rise up when oppressed', 'Strike back when attacked' set the tone of the resistance and showed the country the tenor of self-defence and the options for protest and resistance. Always ahead of the general public, young people, particularly union members of different universities across the country, are gradually emerging as the invisible leaders of the resistance. One of the powerful tools they employ against the coup regime is mobilizing their fellow students to boycott the prevailing university education system.

Reimagining education

Education systems around the world are often centralized and hierarchical. Governments take a paternalistic role to decide for their young generations what is best for them. In Myanmar, historically,

the first and foremost goal of the education system has been to produce skilled and good citizens for the State. Education in this context and philosophy is rather like a factory assembly line to reproduce the status quo that benefits a few. Conformity and a lack of deviation are the principles behind the state-controlled education system. Outside schools across the country, green and white words 'Attitude, Discipline, Knowledge' greet every student. Knowledge is neither objective, nor is it to serve individuals. It is subject to the State's nation-building plans, and for Myanmar it is to sustain the idea of a nation centered on the interests of the Buddhist Burman majority. Education is merely a political wing of the post-colonial Burman State's project to divide and rule between Bamars and minorities. As Aung Py writes in *Mawkun*, minority students face everyday discrimination and a sense of powerlessness in state schools, be they in Burmans' heartlands or minorities' highlands.² Schools with politicized curricula cannot provide a safe space for children, and minorities are reminded of their un-belonging in society.

These structural injustices reinforced by institutions such as schools and universities have been invisible to the public. Because curricula and everyday interactions with students and teachers normalize the exclusionary policies and practices of the

Above: University of Yangon Students' Union members marching through Yangon in February 2021. Photo courtesy of the photographer Wai Lian (University of Yangon).

State, different values are attached to different individuals based on their race, ethnicity, religion, ability, and sexual orientation. Such practices are generally accepted as standards to protect the interests of society. Parents interpret the government's school policies and practices as 'good intentions', particularly those implemented by the Aung San Suu Kyi-led government, as the State won the trust of the public. Trust obscures injustices. Faith prolongs inaction.

Union students, on the other hand, have always been critical of governments. From the independence time through the Socialist era to the current revolutionary period, union students pressurized successive governments to reform education to serve them and the public rather than the State. Today, as never before, the education system is on the brink of collapse or has the biggest potential for seismic change, depending on how one interprets the current situation. Students' manifold criticisms on the pre-coup NLD government, from the internet shutdown to the defence of the genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to the educational reforms in 2014, have largely been justified. The coup proved that students were right to be critical of the government that conceded to the army without making many political gains. When the general public was seen to be repeating students' demands, it proved that the former had now won public support, and that their movement was gaining ground as a force of resistance.

What next for the students?

University students have formed Interim Education Councils to reimagine education. They held public discussions with students online to envision a federal education to support federal democracy. Federalism is a political goal of many minorities. Shy of independence, for which a few groups such as Karen National Union have been fighting through their 'Free Karen State' or 'Kawthoolei'

unification motto, federalism is what many minorities think can guarantee equity, dignity, and prosperity. Ironically, federalism was promoted in minority areas mostly during the democratic period, a strange arrangement by many well-intentioned NGOs and educational institutions. As a consequence, Bamar had little chance to learn about federalism and the shared dream of being together in the Union or *Pyidaungsu*. In their attempt to reclaim education, union students (mostly Bamar) first declared they want 'Federal Education' that is inclusive of everyone and centers students' voices in running universities.

Though many liberated areas have been experimenting with independent education systems free of government intervention, Bamar-dominated areas are yet to experience similar systems. Independent universities mean private ones in Bamar areas, and private means elite in a neoliberal context catering to those with money. So, what does an independent, autonomous, and federal university mean to students? What are their demands for the government and politicians? More importantly, what is their alternative education model like?

To be able to answer such questions, it is important to understand the site of education, i.e., physical buildings and compounds called schools and universities, and the nature of student bodies that occupy this site that collectively pose a credible threat to governments, particularly dictators. The most violent destruction of the material and symbolic student power is the dynamiting of the student union's building on the campus of Yangon University on the 7th of July, 1962, by order of General Ne Win. A physical gathering of students always threatens dictators since students and the site of education historically remain relatively uncontaminated by neoliberal corporate agendas and politics. Students still feel empowered to demand change through education. Ruptured space opened up by the coup expedited such an action. Rather

than fighting for liberation individually, students through unions and groups strive to establish a parallel education system with many autonomous universities to counter the centralized coup education system. Online platforms and lessons necessitated by the pandemic make it possible to reimagine an alternative education away from traditional brick and mortar education.

As some US university students demanded change in their curricula after the 2008 financial crisis and after the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Myanmar students are now envisioning an alternative education. One proposed model is espoused by Virtual Federal University (VFU), led by members of the University of Yangon Students' Union (UYSU). Three principles underpinned VFU. They are 1) to experiment with a learning and teaching model that will facilitate the federal education system; 2) to provide free education; and 3) to center students' voices and demands in the operation of the University. For a country like Myanmar that avoids federalism for fear of a break-up, mobilizing students towards federalism via education can be interpreted as an overtly political act. However, federalism must be understood in terms of everyday civic actions. That includes how different students interact with each other, how educators view their students, and how classes promote self-esteem, dignity, and a sense of belonging in a community. Through carefully selected lessons, modes of delivery, and interactions, VFU aims to foster federal conversations and practices, and to build a federal democratic country from the bottom up.

Partners

Since its inception in early May 2021, VFU has created lessons that can be downloaded online. To offer education in areas without internet, it seeks to partner with radio stations, TV stations, and local learning hubs. VFU lessons vary from Molecular Biology to Critical

Reading to Myths about Burmese History. VFU educators and translators donate their talents and time to provide a wide range of lessons for different language speakers of Burma, an arduous task for a university that does not aim to depend on financial donations. Through different international partners, such as the Global History Lab of Princeton University, it aims to offer certificate courses to selected students. The decolonial methodologies, new thematic curriculum development, and collaborative education model of the IIAS Humanities Across Borders initiative resonates with the VFU's mission. HaB envisions new critical spaces of education free of institutional bureaucracies, disciplinary hierarchies, and gate-keeping mindsets, like the one forged by the youth in Myanmar.

The Covid pandemic has accelerated online learning education activities. However, if VFU is to succeed, global educational institutions, individual educators, and activists must believe in the possibility of a free site of education to help change a social order, transform politics and most of all, usher in a new way of learning and teaching for everyone.

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Notes

- 1 For more on diarchic arrangement and youth-led movement, see Jordt, Ingrid, Than, Tharaphi, Sue Ye Lin, How Generation Z galvanised a revolutionary movement against Myanmar's 2021 military coup, Singapore: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, May 2021.
- 2 Aung Py. (2019) 'မိန့်မာလူမျိုးကြီးပြိုင်အစ စာသင်ကျောင်းက' [Burman chauvinism begins at schools] *Mawkun*, vol. 68

Humanities Across Borders (HAB) curriculum development

Aarti Kawlra

The second phase of the Humanities Across Borders programme has now begun with the consortium partners in the process of signing a curriculum development agreement to further the vision set out in the HAB manifesto that was jointly drafted in Chiang Mai just before the worldwide lockdown early last year. HAB's model of curricula development attends to community-based lived or experiential knowledge often relegated to the margins as non-expert knowledge. HAB's manifesto describes this in its preamble:

"We envision a university that reclaims its rightful civic role and responsibility as a confluence of multiple nodes of knowledge exchange. Our goal, as educators and institutions, is to identify and explore the expansive variety of modes and contexts of acting in, and on, the world. We propose to create border-crossing spaces within and outside universities where academics, students, and communities learn from, and act and work with, each other, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and recognition."

This pedagogical vision will guide HAB's early steps in the institutionalisation of its trans-regional and transdisciplinary education agenda over the next five years. Four syllabi tracks based on themes of universal meaning (food, craft-making, words-in-use, space/place) animate HAB's collaborative curricula development plan, to be co-created with local partners, in dialogue with other localities in the network. Four anchor institutions on four continents have been identified to

develop these tracks to form the *in situ* HAB curriculum: the University of Ghana, Legon; Ambedkar University, Delhi; Leiden University College, The Hague; and Kenyon College, Ohio. Each will take the lead on one of these themes.

HAB at ICAS

To further advance syllabi creation, the consortium will leverage its participation at ICAS12. Although the partners cannot be physically reunited like in 2019 during ICAS11, the network will reconvene remotely from August 24-28. HAB is convening the following roundtables to discuss situated methodologies along the themes of rice, indigo, food and place-making:

Rice as method: a humanities across borders syllabi in-the-making

The discussion intends to explore rice related legacies, resiliencies and revivals in a trans-regional context. It will be an occasion to discuss how to archive memories, biographies and narratives around rice – techniques, seed conservation, varieties, irrigation, crop cycle, riots, rituals – towards a repository of agro-ecological cartographies where community-based knowledge of rice and other staples forms the basis for humanities-grounded syllabi across participating institutions.

Place, nature and indigo

We take the case of the indigo production process to see how the nexus of an object, practice, peoples and nature achieve the weight of politics (be it in environmental movements, in heritage-making or sustaining livelihoods) in specific contexts. The idea is to

build a set of parameters towards a teaching manual similar to the craft practitioners manual but adapted for the humanities and social sciences. The workshop outcome will also be a syllabus using indigo as a method and pedagogy beyond the confines of the textbook and the classroom.

The most urgent of revolutions: the food issue as decolonisation

The principle of continuity of life and the social value of food is increasingly becoming the core of resistance to the world's capitalist order. We see the emergence of multiple communities seeking to reappropriate their food sovereignty. These communities are the crucible of relevant decolonial experiences as well as spaces for caring for the commons. They can be found, in various forms, from one continent to another, waltzing between ingenious innovations, reevaluation of culinary heritages, occupations and creation of gardens and popular restaurants, but also confronted, many times, with repression of various kinds. On the basis of the first session, the goal is to attempt the collective and trans-regional writing of syllabi in the form of textbooks.

Mobility, memory and livelihood: a trans-regional course/text on place-making

The overarching aim is to make the lens of place-making legible for students and educators through the vast spectrum of everyday realities, contradictions and connections encountered through 'place' in local, regional, and global contexts. In what ways does 'place' enable/disable mobilities across borders? And, for a more intersectional, humanist approach

to migration and human futures, can we gain a granular understanding of how livelihoods are negotiated through place-making across national boundaries; urban/rural divides; segregated urban neighbourhoods; forests, hills and plains; sea and shorelines?

Pedagogies of Intersectionality

This additional HAB roundtable brings together scholars interested in intersectionality not only as an analytical framework but also as critical pedagogies of the present. We have been witnessing a multitude of injustices and acts of hatred and apathy that defy interpretation. We ask participants to reflect upon how they have responded in their teaching and research practice to the violence and volatility of identity-based precarity exacerbated by the pandemic the world over. There is an urgent need to bring the overlapping experiences of oppression, both overt and covert, into the curriculum.

<https://www.iias.asia/programmes/hab>

