

Sacrifice, Victimhood, and Justice: Designing Recognition Without Impunity for Post-2021 Pro-Democracy Armed Fighters in Southeastern Myanmar

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Abstract

Since the February 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar, thousands of civilians have transitioned from peaceful protest to armed resistance in response to systematic state repression—relinquishing civilian life, personal safety, and moral innocence in defence of threatened communities and a future democratic order. This phenomenon constitutes what this research conceptualises as political sacrifice. Yet transitional justice frameworks have historically relied on binary distinctions between 'victims' and 'perpetrators,' proving inadequate for pro-democracy armed fighters who embody complex victimhood: individuals who suffered prior state violence before participating in resistance. This raises a central normative challenge: How can transitional justice recognise political sacrifice without collapsing accountability or marginalising civilian victims? Bridging complex victimhood theory with political sacrifice discourse, this research proposes a normative architecture organised around four interconnected principles: recognition for political sacrifice that acknowledges defensive resistance while refusing to justify civilian harm; victim-centred justice that ensures civilian suffering remains central; reparative participation that conditions recognition upon fighters' engagement in acknowledgment and community reconstruction; and democratic reintegration that facilitates transition from combatant to citizen while resisting militarised entitlement. Drawing on comparative insights from cases studies including Colombia, Northern Ireland, South Africa and 18 key informant interviews with fighters, victims, and civil society in southeastern Myanmar, the study argues that the ultimate fulfilment of sacrifice lies not in realization of human dignity but in institutional guarantees of non-recurrence—constitutional reform, security sector transformation, and democratic inclusion. This research advances transitional justice beyond binary categories toward an ethical framework capable of navigating sacrifice, harm, responsibility, and democratic reconstruction simultaneously in Myanmar's post-coup context.