

Leikpya Lone La? Moral obligation and Clear Conscience among Myanmar's Exiles

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Abstract

When a military coup deposed Myanmar's democratically elected leaders in February 2021, the anti-authoritarian struggle known as the Spring Revolution emerged. Over time, the revolution has progressed through different stages, from nonviolent civil strikes to armed resistance. The opposition to military rule and aspirations for federal democracy provide the most visible motivations behind one's decision to take up arms. However, this study argues that a deeper moral logic—captured in the Burmese cultural concept, Leikpya Lone Chin (Clear Conscience), lies at the heart of the movement and has sustained it over time. Functioning simultaneously as an embodiment of the pride of doing the just action and the shame and guilt for inaction, it has become a collective moral register to question or testify one's stance and involvement in the revolution.

This study situates Myanmar's revolution within the broader debates of moral responsibility under dictatorship. Following the recent mass exodus after the 2021, it explores how moral emotions shape political decision-making of people in both longstanding and newly formed Burmese exile communities. Leikpya Lone Chin first appears as one the interlocutors themselves invoked to make sense of their own political choices within a collective struggle and became an analytical framework to interpret the patterns of Myanmar's conscience-driven mobilization. Drawing on mixed methods combining semi-structured interviews with political exiles in two Thai-Myanmar border towns and analysis of cultural artifacts – including revolutionary songs, short films produced by exile filmmakers, protest chants and signs, and social media expressions, the study highlights the dual nature of a conscience-driven mobilization: on one hand, it empowers democratic struggle, and on the other, it risks producing new forms of hierarchy and social fragmentation, raising difficult questions about exclusion, accountability, and long-term reconciliation in Myanmar's future society.