

Beyond Civil Disobedience: How Displacement Reshapes Student Resistance in Myanmar

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Abstract

This paper examines how undergraduate students from Myanmar understand and practice disobedience in the aftermath of displacement stemming from their participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) following the 2021 military coup and how these interpretations are reshaped over time and across space. Drawing on in-depth interviews with internally displaced students (IDS) and cross-border students (CBS), the study challenges the dominant narratives of CDM that focus on government employees and aims to include students' lived experiences and narratives of political resistance before and after displacement.

The findings show that students' narratives of CDM evolved alongside their trajectories of displacement. Prior to displacement, participation in CDM was largely framed as an intuitive, morally driven act of refusal, expressed through nonviolent actions such as university boycotts, street protests, and collective noncooperation. These early engagements were shaped by shared outrage, solidarity, and an immediate response to the coup, sometimes without a fully articulated understanding of CDM.

Following displacement, due to intensified repression, surveillance, arrests, and violence under the military regime, students' understandings of CDM became more complex, fragmented, and context-dependent. Displacement forced students to reassess the feasibility, risks, meanings, and forms of participation, leading to broader interpretations of CDM that accounted for survival, mobility constraints, and unequal access to resources. For many, displacement marked a shift from visible, collective protest to less visible forms of resistance, including educational withdrawal, cross-border mobility, covert organizing, digital activism, and, in some cases, armed resistance.

The study demonstrates that under conditions of extreme authoritarian repression and forced displacement, traditional concepts of civil disobedience as public, nonviolent action become insufficient. Students resort to "uncivil disobedience," as "civil" is no longer relevant under a military regime that violates all forms of civility while maintaining a sense of legitimacy, intentionality, and resistance to military rule.