

Liminal Resistance amid Repression and Authoritarian Co-optation: CDM in Exile

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Abstract

Since the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) have faced systematic repression, including arrest, dismissal, surveillance, and political exclusion. Many have fled to the Thai–Myanmar border area, such as Mae Sot, where they live as undocumented migrants navigating legal ambiguity and fragmented protection regimes. In this context, exile becomes not merely displacement but an extended condition of political suspension between crisis and opportunity. This study conceptualizes CDM exile as a form of liminal resistance. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and participant observation, it examines how displaced activists inhabit spaces where they are neither recognized citizens nor protected refugees, yet continue to exercise moral and political agency. Resistance persists through informal activist networks, virtual engagement, and collective political imagination. Alongside repression, the military regime has deployed strategies of authoritarian co-optation, including promises of reinstatement, payment of back salaries, and removal from blacklists. These inducements generate ethical dilemmas, positioning exiled CDM members between material survival and principled opposition, and exposing the fragile legitimacy of authoritarian rule. By centering the narratives and moral reasoning of CDM participants, this research highlights how exiled activists articulate alternative visions of Myanmar's democratic future. Exile thus emerges as a dynamic political space where repression and co-optation intersect, and where crisis coexists with the possibility of political reimagination at the fragile margins of state collapse.