

PANEL

From Institutional Collapse to Community Adaptation: Civilian Protection in Post-Coup Myanmar

Convener

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Panel Description

Civilian protection has experienced a profound transformation in Myanmar since the 2021 coup, where collapsing legal institutions and shrinking civic space fundamentally challenge traditional protective mechanisms. Communities, civil society organisations, and international partners have adapted in response escalating violence and extreme repression. This panel examines this shift from collapse to adaptation, arguing that civilian protection in contemporary conflict settings is increasingly shaped not by formal institutions, but by relational, community-led, and practice-based approaches that operate within and despite conditions of severe constraint.

The first paper examines the collapse of legal protection in post-coup Myanmar, where the law no longer operates as a shield but as an instrument through which vulnerability is produced. Myanmar illustrates a model of “protective inversion” in which legal institutions persist formally while their protective function collapses substantively. Drawing on mixed-methods analysis of over 550 criminal cases, it shows how core protective guarantees – protection from arbitrary arrest, the right to defence, evidentiary standards, and judicial independence – have been systematically weakened. The paper argues that legal protection in fragile authoritarian contexts should be understood in terms of the practical capacity of the law to restrain power, with implications for rethinking rule-of-law assistance, transitional justice, and civilian protection.

The second paper analyses how Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP), as practiced by Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) in Myanmar, has evolved in response to intensified violence, fragmented armed actors, and expanded digital surveillance. Moving from security for communities toward security with communities, NP’s approach recognises conflict-affected civilians not only as recipients of protection but as central actors and producers of protection knowledge. The paper explores how community-led early warning–early response systems, digital security practices, and proactive engagement in highly restrictive operating environments have been re-imagined and adapted under conditions of extreme repression, highlighting increasingly reciprocal knowledge production and lessons learned for civilian protection in highly fragmented and volatile contexts.

The third paper brings a research impact perspective. It examines how protection research has contributed to impact in Myanmar, tracing the benefits of four projects delivered through an international research collaboration on UCP and community self-protection (CSP), Creating Safer Space. Through illustrative examples from Myanmar and Thailand, the paper

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suggests that research impact is not a linear process of knowledge production and uptake, but an ongoing, iterative, and relational contribution within dynamic protection landscapes. By interrogating impact pathways across multiple domains and stakeholder groups, it offers empirical insight into how participatory research and knowledge co-production can support UCP/CSP in Myanmar and beyond.

Together, the panel demonstrates that civilian protection in post-coup Myanmar is being reconfigured across legal, operational, and epistemic domains. It shows that protection is no longer primarily delivered through formal institutions, but co-produced through dynamic interactions between communities, practitioners, and researchers. In doing so, the panel contributes to broader debates on how to conceptualise, support, and evaluate civilian protection in contexts of institutional collapse, offering insights with relevance for other conflict-affected settings.