

Resistance from Overseas: U.S. Diasporic and Transnational Activism in Response to the 2021
Myanmar Military Coup

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Abstract

While homeland activism among the Burmese diaspora in the United States experienced a decline in momentum throughout Myanmar's democratic transition period (2011-2021), there has been a discernible shift since the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup. The junta's attempts to thwart the formation of organized resistance proved unsuccessful against the rise of a new transnational social movement—the Spring Revolution. With the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup continuing to unfold, this study seeks to discuss how modal and ideological shifts influence the diasporic and transnational dimensions of homeland activism among Burmese Americans. Existing literature on Burmese diasporic and transnational activism has largely focused on social movements responding to the 8888 Uprising (1988) and Saffron Revolution (2007). While Burmese Americans have traditionally played an active role in delivering political and economic remittances to Myanmar's pro-democracy forces, the U.S. Burmese diaspora has not been operating on the same modality of precursive social movements. This study explores the U.S. Burmese diaspora's responses to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, closely examining the goals, visions, tactics, and strategies that U.S. Burmese activist organizations operated under. Using semi-structured and in-depth interviews, the findings of this research suggest three key sites of advocacy within the U.S. Burmese diaspora: 1) networking and coalition-building across ethnic, religious, and political boundaries, 2) political lobbying to shape U.S. foreign policy on Myanmar, and 3) cross-border assistance through economic remittances and on-the-ground coordination.

Abbreviations

American Baptist Churches (ABCUSA)

All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF)

Alliance for Democracy in Myanmar (ADM)

Burma Advocacy Group (BAG)

Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act (BURMA Act)

Chin Community of Indiana (CCI)

Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM)

Committee for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma (CRDB)

Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)

Civil Society Organization (CSO)

Ethnic Armed Organization (EAO)

Free Burma Coalition (FBC)

Global Movement for Myanmar Democracy (GM4MD)

I Am Knyaw (IAK)

Internally Displaced Person (IDP)

Kachin Alliance (KA)

Kachin Independence Army (KIA)

Kachin Independence Organization (KIO)

Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team (KPICT)

National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB)

National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA)

Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)

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National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC)

National Unity Government (NUG)

People's Defense Force (PDF)

United States Advocacy Coalition for Myanmar (USACM)

I. Introduction

In Myanmar, also known as Burma, the Burmese¹ consciousness of democracy, human rights, and justice occurred through a revolution of ideas. Burmese activists have positioned themselves within the framework of these concepts—evolving and refining them through stages of political conflict and humanitarian crises—in hopes of materializing their imaginations for Myanmar’s future. While these localized conceptualizations arose inside of Myanmar, Burmese diasporas around the world are neither isolated or absent from shaping them. Rather, Burmese diasporas have added a transnational dimension by engaging in homeland activism beyond Myanmar’s borders. In the United States, generations of Burmese Americans have developed transnational spaces to advocate for changes in Myanmar, transcending the traditional boundaries of sovereign borders by creating opportunity structures for homeland activism. It is within these transnational spaces that Burmese Americans have been able to facilitate responses to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, a crisis that catalyzed what we now recognize as a formidable resistance movement against Myanmar’s military regime—the Spring Revolution.

This study evaluates how the Burmese diaspora in the United States responded to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, closely examining the goals, visions, tactics, and strategies of U.S. Burmese activist organizations. The findings suggest that the U.S. Burmese diaspora has employed three key forms of activism in response to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup: 1) networking and coalition-building across ethnic, religious, and political boundaries, 2) political lobbying to shape U.S. foreign policy on Myanmar, and 3) cross-border assistance through economic remittances and on-the-ground coordination.

¹ “Burmese” refers to individuals with origins in Myanmar.

II. Transnationalism in Diasporas

Transnational phenomena is facilitated through cross-boundary spaces occupied by non-state actors, including but not limited to individuals, families, corporations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and other non-state organizations.² A diaspora in of itself is understood to be “a transnational social organisation relating both to the society of origin and the society of settlement.”³ Using Brubaker’s theoretical framework on diasporas, a diaspora can be defined as a subset of ethnic communities with three elements: 1) physical departure from society of origin (i.e. dispersion), 2) maintenance of connections with a real or imagined homeland (i.e. homeland orientation), and 3) preservation of a distinct identity from the society of settlement (i.e. boundary maintenance).⁴ Transnational activities can manifest in different forms, but within diasporas, they are informed by a shared sense of sustaining roots in the homeland. For diasporans in exile,⁵ these roots are often planted through non-literal return. Diasporans can engage in transnational activities through actions, including but not limited to “travel, remittances, cultural exchange, and political lobbying.”⁶ The rise in international migration and technology has opened up new transnational social spaces, increasing the interconnectivity of diasporans with their homeland.⁷ These transnational social spaces have made inroads for the transnationalization of activism, allowing diasporans to advocate for reforms in their homeland without repatriation. Dale defines transnational social movements as “sustained contentious interactions with opponents by networks of actors that have common purposes linked across nation-state boundaries, and that demonstrate a capacity to generate

² Khachig Tölölyan, “The Contemporary Discourse of Diaspora Studies,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 27, no. 3 (2007): 652.

³ Östen Wahlbeck, “The Concept of Diaspora as an Analytical Tool in the Study of Refugee Communities,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 28, no. 2 (2002): 221.

⁴ Rogers Brubaker, “The ‘Diaspora’ Diaspora,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 5.

⁵ “Exile” refers to cases of compulsory or voluntary absence from an individual’s country of origin.

⁶ Tölölyan, “Discourse of Diaspora Studies,” 649.

⁷ Wahlbeck, “Diaspora as an Analytical Tool,” 223.

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coordinated social mobilization in more than one country to publicly influence social change.”⁸

Under this definition, it is important to recognize that not all transnational activism operates under a transnational social movement. While the Spring Revolution developed into a transnational social movement, some activists in the U.S. Burmese diaspora engaged in separate transnational campaigns to respond to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup. It is within the scope of the research question to identify transnational activities under the Spring Revolution, as well as forms of cross-border assistance carried out apolitically. To ground these transnational activities, it is important to analyze the diasporic formation and composition of the U.S. Burmese diaspora.

III. Burmese Diaspora in the United States

A. Dispersion: Drivers of Migration

The Burmese diaspora in the United States comprises an estimated population of 207,200,⁹ predominantly located in California, Indiana, New York, Texas, and Minnesota. The U.S. Burmese diaspora is diverse along ethnic, religious, and ideological dimensions, which underscores the importance of treating it as a heterogeneous body. The first significant wave of Burmese migration to the United States occurred after General Ne Win orchestrated Myanmar’s first military coup in 1962.¹⁰ Since then, protracted ethnic conflict, political strife, and economic turmoil catalyzed subsequent waves of migration to the United States. Burmese migration to the United States can be classified under two types of drivers: involuntary and voluntary. The most common involuntary drivers are 1) refugee and asylum seekers fleeing from forced displacement and persecution, and 2) political dissidents and officials facing exile.¹¹ Spanning over half of a

⁸ John G. Dale, *Free Burma: Transnational Legal Action and Corporate Accountability* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), chap. 1.

⁹ “2021 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates Detailed Tables: Asian Alone or in Any Combination by Selected Groups” United States Census Bureau, 2021.

¹⁰ Ne Win’s military regime marks the onset of military rule in Myanmar’s political system.

¹¹ Renaud Egreteau, “Burma in Diaspora: A Preliminary Research Note on the Politics of Burmese Diasporic Communities in Asia,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2012): 120.

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century, Myanmar has experienced civil conflict between the military and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs)—the longest continuing civil war in the world. In these conflict zones, many ethnic minority groups (e.g. Chin, Kachin, Karen, Mon, Rohingya, Shan, and more) have been forcibly relocated and subjected to human rights abuses by the military. Internal conflict in Myanmar has created one of the largest refugee crises in the world, leading a significant number of ethnic minorities to resettle in the United States. Additionally, Myanmar’s military regimes have historically cracked down on political dissidents and pro-democracy movements by arresting and inflicting violence on activists, civilian leaders, and journalists. Many Burmese civilians were forced to flee from Myanmar due to fear of retaliation or imprisonment by the military, leaving them in exile. Involuntary migration is expected to increase due to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, which has increased the severity of conflicts occurring in ethnic minority regions and led to crackdowns in the state’s key urban regions. Voluntary migration has often occurred in the search for socio-economic opportunities. Decades of economic mismanagement and autarky has devastated Myanmar’s economy,¹² in which 48.2% of the state’s population lived in poverty during 2005.¹³ While socio-economic factors are a common voluntary driver of migration, some Burmese civilians may involuntarily migrate due to severe poverty.

B. Historical Agents of Transnational Activism within the U.S. Burmese Diaspora

The U.S. Burmese diaspora has engaged in transnational activism by transnationalizing social movements and collective action campaigns for Myanmar. These transnational activities can be traced back to 1987, when Burmese exiles in the United States established the Committee

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ines A. Ferreira, Vincenzo Salvucci, and Finn Tarp, “Poverty and Vulnerability Transitions in Myanmar: An Analysis Using Synthetic Panels,” *Review of Developmental Economics* 25, no. 4 (2021): 1922.

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for the Restoration of Democracy in Burma (CRDB).¹⁴ CRDB worked with the All Burma Students Democratic Front (ABSDF), an organization formed by political dissidents from Myanmar who fled military crackdowns during the 8888 Uprising.¹⁵ As ABSDF established camps in the Thai-Myanmar border, they worked in collaboration with CRDB to coordinate political activities with on-the-ground student activists in Myanmar.¹⁶ ABSDF and CRDB also collaborated with NGOs that were delivering humanitarian relief to Burmese refugees.¹⁷ Together, these organizations worked on disseminating information, facilitating humanitarian aid, fundraising, networking, and setting up tours for ABSDF representatives to speak in Western democratic states.¹⁸

A turning point for transnational activism within the U.S. Burmese diaspora was the emergence of the Free Burma Movement in the early 1990s.¹⁹ Prior to the Free Burma Movement, civilian resistance against Ne Win's military regime reached new heights when activists in Myanmar staged nationwide pro-democracy protests, known as the 8888 Uprising. During this time, Aung San Suu Kyi rose to prominence for her leadership in the uprising, receiving domestic and international recognition as a symbol of democracy in Myanmar. As the military placed her under house arrest, the world witnessed Myanmar's plight for democracy. The uprising was eventually subdued after the State Law and Order Restoration Council²⁰ seized power in the 1988 Myanmar Military Coup. The Free Burma Movement transnationalized the 8888 Uprising, but was not a mere reflection of it. The movement operated under a new

¹⁴ Maung Zarni, "Chapter Three: Resistance and Cybercommunities: The Internet and the Free Burma Movement," *Counterpoints* 59 (2000): 73.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ John G. Dale. *Free Burma: Transnational Legal Action and Corporate Accountability*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), chap. 1.

²⁰ The State Law and Order Restoration Council was the military government of Myanmar from 1988 to 1997.

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modality, pursuing pro-democracy activism through transnational spaces facilitated by globalized networks and communication channels. The movement erupted from a series of grassroots activism within Burmese diasporas (notably in the United States), which launched transnational campaigns in collaboration with on-the-ground activists, NGOs, and other “sister”²¹ movements.²² One umbrella organization under the movement was the Free Burma Coalition (FBC), founded by Maung Zarni in 1995.²³ FBC was an internet-based coalition with two primary objectives: 1) promoting international boycotts and divestments in Myanmar through economic activism,²⁴ and 2) developing a grassroots and international Free Burma Movement in support of freedom in Myanmar.²⁵ FBC carried out unprecedented internet coordination, creating networks of cybercommunities between the United States, Myanmar, and other countries. As a result, the Free Burma Movement was able to successfully pressure multinational corporations into withdrawing investments from Myanmar and lobby the U.S. Congress into imposing sanctions on Myanmar.²⁶ The Free Burma Movement also responded to the Saffron Revolution (2007), which was a series of pro-democracy and economic protests against the State Peace and Development Council’s²⁷ decision to lift fuel subsidies.²⁸

In 1990, the National Coalition Government of the Union of Burma (NCGUB) was established as a civilian government in exile, claiming to be the official government of Myanmar. It was formed by members of the military’s opposition parties, including the National League of Democracy. The NCGUB was based in the state of Maryland and operated out of an office in

²¹ The “sister” movements include movements advocating for women’s rights, human rights, environmental rights, and labor rights.

²² Ibid, chap. 2.

²³ Joe Urschel, “College Cry: ‘Free Burma’ Activists Make Inroads with U.S. Companies,” *USA Today*, 1996.

²⁴ Zarni, “Resistance and Cybercommunities,” 79.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ The State Peace and Development Council was Myanmar’s official military government from 1997 to 2011.

²⁸ David Steinberg, “Globalization, Dissent, and Orthodoxy: Burma/Myanmar and the Saffron Revolution,” *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 9, no. 2 (2008): 53.

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Washington, D.C. It lobbied foreign states and international NGOs to delegitimize the military's claim to state power.²⁹ While it failed to receive diplomatic recognition, it distributed philanthropic aid to underground NGOs in Southeast Asia and established transnational networks to traffic information.³⁰ The NCGUB eventually dissolved and the Free Burma Movement began to dissipate, following Myanmar's democratic transition period (2011-2021).³¹ However, Myanmar's democratic opening was short-lived. The 2021 Myanmar Military Coup triggered yet again, a new transnational social movement.

IV. The Birth of the Spring Revolution

A. 2021 Myanmar Military Coup

In the morning of February 1, 2021, Myanmar's democratic transition ended after the state's military forces orchestrated a coup against elected leaders of the civilian government. The military declared a state of emergency, alleging that voter fraud³² in the November 2020 General Election warranted the transfer of sovereign authority to General Min Aung Hlaing. The military staged an internet blackout as a preemptive countermeasure to 1) delay information from reaching civilians and the international stage, and 2) suppress the development of organized resistance.³³ The military recognized that the age of technology—the growing interconnectivity of Burmese civilians with domestic and transnational networks—was a tool for their opponents to mobilize resistance campaigns, document military abuses, and disseminate information. However, the military's attempts to digitally disconnect Burmese civilians from the world was

²⁹ John G. Dale. *Free Burma: Transnational Legal Action and Corporate Accountability*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), chap. 2.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ In 2011, Myanmar's military permitted the formation of a civilian government while retaining its power through a semi-democratic system.

³² The claim that voter fraud occurred during the November 2020 General Election has not been substantiated by credible evidence.

³³ International Crisis Group, "Myanmar's Military Struggles to Control the Virtual Battlefield," *International Crisis Group*, 2021.

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transient. The blackout forcibly shut down the operations of financial institutions and enterprises, testing the military's ability to simultaneously control online access and project a business-as-usual front.³⁴ The military proceeded to restore internet access, but filtered websites, instant messaging, and social media networks from being accessed by civilians. Despite these efforts, the military was met with the launch of the Civil Disobedience Movement³⁵ (CDM) on Facebook. Civilians circumvented the military's countermeasures by using Virtual Private Networks to access digital platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram. The civilians' momentum of resistance gave rise to the Spring Revolution—an anti-junta mass movement that seeks to achieve democracy, human rights, and justice in Myanmar.

B. Civilian Government in Exile

On February 5, 2021, ousted legislators from the National League of Democracy formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)—a legislature in exile. The CRPH aims to fulfill the parliamentary duties of the dissolved legislature and is composed of multi-party legislators from the Pyithu Hluttaw (lower house) and Amyotha Hluttaw (upper house).³⁶ The CRPH designates itself as the only legitimate legislative body of Myanmar. Following its formation, the CRPH collaborated with 27 other political institutions (including EAOs and existing consultative councils) to establish the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) on March 8, 2021.³⁷ The NUCC is an advisory body of the National Unity Government (NUG), which was eventually formed by the CRPH and NUCC on April 16, 2021.³⁸ The NUG represents the executive body in exile and is composed of multi-party and multi-ethnic leaders,

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ The Civil Disobedience Movement is an anti-junta strike movement under the Spring Revolution.

³⁶ The Irrawaddy. "Amid Coup, Myanmar's NLD Lawmakers Form Committee to Serve as Legitimate Parliament." *The Irrawaddy*, 2021.

³⁷ National Unity Consultative Council. "Announcement of the National Unity Consultative Council." *National Unity Consultative Council*, 2021.

³⁸ Ibid.

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including the detained Aung San Suu Kyi (State Counsellor) and Win Myint (President). Currently, the NUG is headed by Vice President Duwa Lashi La, who is the acting president. The NUG is seeking diplomatic recognition as the official government of Myanmar, alongside the CRPH as the official legislature of Myanmar. Currently, the CRPH and NUG have received diplomatic recognition from the European Parliament as the sole legitimate representatives of Myanmar. The NUG also established an armed wing, known as the People's Defense Force (PDF), which cooperates with EAOs and is engaging in a civil war against Myanmar's junta. As a civilian government in exile, the CRPH and NUG was established with the intent to serve as a transitional government to Myanmar's military regime.

V. Literature Review

As the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup continues to unfold, there is a lack of existing literature on the U.S. Burmese diaspora's response to it. The breadth of literature on U.S. diasporic and transnational activism in precursive social movements is limited, given transformations resulting from the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup. While historical agents are useful in identifying transnational activities and structures within the U.S. Burmese diaspora, these movements, triggered by specific events, namely the 8888 Uprising and Saffron Revolution, are unable to comprehensively explain the responses of successive transnational social movements. Socio-political shifts from the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup have changed precursive transnational relationships and structures, as internal changes in the diaspora have influenced their external responses. This relationship has been fluid, meaning that the diaspora's external responses have also influenced their internal dynamics. For this reason, this study seeks to explain how the U.S. Burmese diaspora responded to the recent military coup by exploring

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how the strategies and tactics employed by Burmese Americans operate within the scope of their goals and visions.

Existing literature on U.S. Burmese diasporic and transnational activism primarily examines the context surrounding the 8888 Uprising and Saffron Revolution. Dale explains how the Free Burma Movement focused on targeting transnational relationships between Myanmar and the state's corporate partners by using legal mechanisms to promote corporate accountability.³⁹ His analysis operates under the presumption that the Free Burma Movement sought "radical reform through the politics of influence,"⁴⁰ rather than regime change. The popularization of legal campaigns can be explained by the timing of the Free Burma Movement, as it coincided with the junta's transition towards market liberalism and the removal of fuel subsidies in 2007. This provided activists with the opportunity to frame financial exchanges between transnational corporations, Western democratic governments, and Myanmar as acts of complicity in the junta's political repression and human rights abuses. The U.S. Burmese diaspora's responses under the Free Burma Movement were not centered on the same goals and visions that have been shaping their responses to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup. Under the Spring Revolution, many Burmese Americans are seeking regime change. The NUG has been able to challenge the legitimacy of Myanmar's junta, positioning itself as an alternative diplomatic actor for the U.S. to engage with. While Dale does account for how the NCGUB positioned itself as a civilian government in exile,⁴¹ the NCGUB was a provisional government that lacked diplomatic recognition, unlike the NUG. For this reason, regime change is a focal point in the U.S. Burmese diaspora's lobbying efforts for U.S.-Myanmar foreign policy. This

³⁹ John G. Dale. *Free Burma: Transnational Legal Action and Corporate Accountability*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), chap. 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, chap. 1.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, chap. 2.

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study expands discussions on transnational sites of resistance by accounting for the demands of regime change among U.S. diasporic activists, as well as assessing the relationship between these activists and the NUG's role as a transitional government.

Scholars have discussed the role of technology and transnational networks in revolutionizing how Burmese diasporas engage with pro-democracy movements in Myanmar. Dale credits the increased accessibility of communication channels and solidarity of transnational networks as two key developments that transnationalized the 8888 Uprising into the Free Burma Movement.⁴² With the aid of the internet and satellite phones, pro-democracy activists in Myanmar were able to circumvent military interception and censorship by connecting with Burmese exiles to develop FBC as a transnational information network.⁴³ Zarni explained how FBC created transnational cybercommunities, which formed a collective political identity among Burmese dissidents.⁴⁴ These cybercommunities navigated around the military's tight control on media by enabling transnational flows of information, resource mobilization, and campaign organizing efforts.⁴⁵ However, FBC is no longer in formal operation and has not sustained its role in response to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup. Since the cultivation of transnational networks through online communication channels has and will remain a key element of transnational activism within the U.S. Burmese diaspora, this study will account for new technological developments used by activists to outmaneuver the military's attempts to suppress transnational coordination. This requires a reassessment of the nature of transnational relationships and networks between U.S. diasporic activists and on-the-ground actors.

Scholars have also addressed the pervasiveness of ideological and identity-based

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid, chap. 1.

⁴⁴ Zarni, "Resistance and Cybercommunities," 85.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 72.

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divisions within Burmese diasporic and transnational activism, but a great deal of the literature describes the nature of divisions before the recent military coup. While Dale and Zarni highlight how the innovative features of transnational networks increased interconnectivity between diasporic activists and on-the-ground actors, Egreteau suggests that pro-democracy activism in diasporas may not be wholly inclusive due to ethnicization and exclusionary agendas.⁴⁶ Egreteau argues that ethnic Burmans in exile are less inclined to support federalism and more inclined to prioritize pro-democracy efforts with Aung San Suu Kyi as a focal figure.⁴⁷ While there is a historical precedent and contemporary continuation of pro-Burman activism within the U.S. Burmese diaspora, socio-political changes from the recent military coup have resulted in a reconceptualization of regime change. The recent military coup is not a mere catalyst for the Spring Revolution nor is the Spring Revolution a reiteration of precursive social movements. The formation of the NUG reflects an unprecedented change in ethnic and political representation, as it 1) includes multi-ethnic and multi-party leaders, and 2) seeks to promote federal democracy and ethnic reconciliation. As the NUG positions itself as the transitional government to Myanmar's junta, it has become a centralized body for activists to rally behind. Additionally, EAOs have played an important role in liberating territories and protecting civilians from the junta. This has incentivized cooperation between the PDF and EAOs, as battleground advantages are crucial for the Spring Revolution to succeed. Fighting together against a common enemy, this cooperation has increased relations among Myanmar's ethnic groups. This study explains how the U.S. Burmese diaspora has increasingly displayed a shared receptiveness towards pursuing federalism and ethnic reconciliation in their goals and visions. While ethnic divisions still exist within the diaspora, these socio-political changes suggest an

⁴⁶ Egreteau, "Burma in Diaspora," 133.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

inward shift in how the diaspora perceives solidarity and collection action.

VI. Research Methods

A. Scope

The purpose of this study is to evaluate the U.S. Burmese diaspora's response to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, using U.S. Burmese activist organizations as a unit of analysis. The U.S. Burmese activist organizations must meet three criteria: 1) the organization must actively operate in the United States, 2) the organization must be led by Burmese Americans, and 3) the organization must have responded to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup by participating in anti-junta political activism and/or providing assistance to affected stakeholders in Myanmar. This precludes non-diasporic organizations that responded to the military coup through political or humanitarian campaigns, as well as diasporic organizations that maintain pro-junta stances or actively assist the junta.

While forms of activism can take place through different bodies, the scope of this study focuses on U.S. Burmese activist organizations for two primary reasons. First, there are a plethora of organizations representing the U.S. Burmese diaspora under different predispositions. Some of these organizations have engaged in homeland activism prior to the recent military coup while others were established in response to it. These organizations can have different orientations among ethnic, religious, and ideological lines, which can inform the goals and visions they operate under. Second, these organizations are often structured entities with defined missions and relative recognition within the diaspora. These organizations can provide a platform for Burmese Americans to engage in collective action efforts, which has the capacity to provide insight on community mobilization in response to the recent military coup.

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B. Methodology

For the methodology, nine semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with representatives from seven U.S. Burmese activist organizations. The interviews were conducted as one-time virtual sessions on Zoom or Facebook’s voice call feature, which lasted between one to two hours. Public records and primary sources (i.e. written documents forwarded from organizations) substantiated the information gathered from interviews. The respondents were selected through purposive sampling, which was intended to diversify the types of organizations represented in this study. Organizations were categorized based on their orientations, including structure, mission, ideology, and activities. Respondents from these organizations were selected based on their role, which required them to have a close level of involvement with the internal operations of their organization. The respondents were recruited through email, Facebook Messenger, and Signal. This was facilitated by referrals through contacts from activist networks within the U.S. Burmese diaspora, along with online research.

C. Sample

The following respondents and their respective organizations represent the sample.

Table 1.1

* Indicates that the respondent will be identified under the assigned pseudonym.

Respondent Name or Pseudonym	Organization	Organization Acronym
Khin Thiri Nandar Soe	Alliance for Democracy in Myanmar	ADM
Skylar*		

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Van Kio	Burma Advocacy Group	BAG
Charlie*	Chin Community of Indiana	CCI
Eden*	Global Movement for Myanmar Democracy	GM4MD
Eh Nay Thaw	I Am Knyaw	IAK
Gum San Nsang	Kachin Alliance	KA
Alex*	United States Advocacy Coalition for Myanmar	USACM
Michael Haack		

Alliance for Democracy in Myanmar (ADM) is a coalition that includes participants from more than 15 grassroots activist organizations who operate autonomously, but collaborate for their shared vision and goals of promoting democracy, human rights, and rule of law in Myanmar.⁴⁸ These grassroots activist organizations are local, national, and international in scope. While many organizations are based in the U.S. Burmese diaspora, ADM’s network also reaches international diasporic organizations, humanitarian organizations, legal organizations, religious organizations, college organizations, and other Southeast Asian and/or Milk Tea Alliance⁴⁹ organizations.⁵⁰

Burma Advocacy Group (BAG) is a sub-committee under the American Baptist Churches’s (ABCUSA) Burma Refugee Commission. BAG was formed through the

⁴⁸ Khin Thiri Nandar Soe, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 3, 2023.

⁴⁹ The “Milk Tea Alliance” is an online transnational pro-democracy and human rights movement involving netizens from Myanmar, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and other countries in Asia.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

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collaboration of multi-ethnic and religious leaders in the United States, comprising a coalition of 22 organizations, primarily U.S. Burmese activist organizations and churches.⁵¹ BAG seeks to provide assistance for human rights, religious freedom, and democracy in Myanmar.⁵²

Chin Community of Indiana (CCI) is a community organization that operates out of an office in Indianapolis, Indiana, which is home to one of the largest concentrations of Chin people outside of Myanmar. CCI seeks to enhance the conditions of Chin people in day-to-day survival.⁵³ CCI provides social welfare services to the Chin community, which includes employment, English as a Second Language (ESL), and citizenship services.⁵⁴ The organization's advocacy sector focuses on advocating for Chin people in the United States and Myanmar. CCI is an official member of BAG.

Global Movement for Myanmar Democracy (GM4MD) is a youth-led grassroots organization that “mobilizes Myanmar diaspora youth and friends to fight for freedom and democracy in Myanmar by harnessing the power of global digital networks.”⁵⁵ GM4MD's vision is for youth in Myanmar to thrive in peaceful communities under freedom.⁵⁶ GM4MD is an official member of USACM.

I Am Knyaw⁵⁷ (IAK) is a transnational youth-led organization that seeks to empower Karen youth and deliver humanitarian aid to Myanmar's Karen State (i.e. Kaw Thoo Lei).⁵⁸ IAK does not operate under a political orientation. They do not have a public stance on the recent military coup or armed ethnic resistance.⁵⁹ IAK has staff from the United States, Myanmar,

⁵¹ Van Kio, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 17, 2023.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Charlie, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 14, 2023.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Eden, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 7, 2023.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ “Knyaw” is the Karen translation of “Karen.”

⁵⁸ Eh Nay Thaw, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 22, 2023.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

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Australia, Norway, Singapore, and Thailand. They operate in the United States, but have a principal office in Thailand.

Kachin Alliance (KA) comprises a network of Kachin communities and churches in the United States, seeking to “eradicate human rights abuses suffered by the Kachins in Burma and to promote justice, equality and peace for the Kachin people.”⁶⁰ In 2016, KA established an official coordination office in Washington, D.C. to reach Kachin organizations in the United States and Myanmar.⁶¹ KA is an official member of BAG and the Kachin Political Interim Coordination Team (KPICT).

United States Advocacy Coalition for Myanmar (USACM) is a coalition of over 20 organizations, which lobbies the U.S. government to support true democratization and a functioning federal system in Myanmar.⁶² The coalition is composed of U.S. Burmese activist organizations and primarily focuses on advocating for U.S.-Myanmar foreign policy through different U.S. government agencies.

The sample includes different types of activist organizations in the U.S. Burmese diaspora. The inclusion of ADM, BAG, and USACM was intended to gather insight on coalition-building strategies and tactics, which is relevant to understanding collaborative and cross-organizational structures within the U.S. Burmese diaspora. CCI, IAK, and KA have ethnic orientations, which can provide insight on the unique positionality and priorities of Chin, Karen, and Kachin activists, respectively. Additionally, GM4MD and IAK are youth-oriented, which is useful for examining the advocacy tools that younger generations use. Varying and overlapping

⁶⁰ Kachin Alliance. “About Kachin Alliance.” *Kachin Alliance*.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Alex, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 10, 2023.

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modalities in activism are important to examine on an organizational level, as they can offer a diverse range of responses to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup.

IAK, as an apolitical organization, will be omitted from discussions pertaining to political activism. The remaining six organizations will be discussed within the scope of political responses: ADM, BAG, CCI, GM4MD, KA, and USACM.

D. Limitations

Due to limited timing and logistical constraints, the sample size is relatively small. The generalizability of these findings primarily applies to the sample. The responses from coalitions (i.e. ADM, BAG, and USACM) are not generalizable among all of its coalition members. This study seeks to determine patterns and trends in U.S. Burmese diasporic and transnational responses to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup.

E. Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of activism, ethical considerations were made to protect participants from security concerns. Written informed consent was collected from each participant prior to conducting the interviews. All research participants were informed about the voluntary nature of their participation, purpose of the study, potential risks associated with the study, and interview procedure. Additionally, participants were informed that their participation would not be financially compensated and that the study would not be used for commercial purposes. All raw material from the interviews will be kept confidential from other parties. Participants who indicated a preference to be identified in this study provided consent to the citation and reference of their identities in this report. The identities of the remaining participants were kept confidential in data collection procedures and will not be cited or referenced in this report. To protect the identities of these participants, assigned pseudonyms will be used.

VII. Thesis Statement

The U.S. Burmese diaspora has employed three key forms of activism in response to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup: 1) networking and coalition-building across ethnic, religious, and political boundaries, 2) political lobbying to shape U.S. foreign policy on Myanmar, and 3) cross-border assistance through economic remittances and on-the-ground coordination.

VIII. Networking and Coalition-Building

In response to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, coalition-building among U.S. Burmese activist organizations primarily operate on three different cross-organizational levels: 1) multi-ethnic collaboration, 2) religious collaboration, and 3) CRPH, NUCC, and/or NUG collaboration. Within the U.S. Burmese diaspora, coalition-building is used as a strategy to leverage cross-organizational collaboration, often through shared causes and mutually beneficial relationships.

A. Unite and Master: Multi-Ethnic Coalition-Building

Multi-ethnic coalition-building is used as a tactic to foster solidarity and collaboration among Burmese ethnic groups. This is strategic for activists to promote ethnic reconciliation, present a unified front, and mobilize collective support. When asked about challenges in U.S. diasporic activism, a common response from respondents was the prominence of ethnic divisions. As Gum San Nsang points out, “A country with a successive government that thrusts its power through fostering division, leveling wedges against sub-ethnic groups, undoubtedly, will have the implication of causing misunderstanding and division within these groups.”⁶³ These divisions have led to disjointed relations between Myanmar’s ethnic groups, which Burmese diasporas are not immune from. Ethnic divisions have affected how activists identify with homeland activism, to the extent that, as Michael Haack puts it, “some of them don’t identify as

⁶³ Gum San Nsang, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 8, 2023.

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Burmese.”⁶⁴ Ethnocentrism has largely precluded Burmese ethnic minorities from having their interests and concerns represented within the mainstream fabric of the pro-democracy movement. These divisions have fragmented homeland activism, leading to factions and conflicts between ethnic groups. According to Khin Thiri Nandar Soe, “The activism almost died out. Small organizations in the local area were working on their own. We were not as strong as before when that happened. My main concern is how we can fix that—how we can bring everyone back together and work together.”⁶⁵ Ethnic divisions have historically promoted isolationist tendencies among Burmese ethnic groups, inhibiting solidarity and collaboration that could have mobilized influence within the diaspora. In response to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, there has been a shift in how Burmese Americans conceptualize the stakeholders in their homeland activism. What is unique about the Spring Revolution is that a significant number of activists are seeking a multi-ethnic federal democracy, extending the scope of self-rule and agency under a union framework. For this reason, multi-ethnic coalition-building is not a mere tactic to build strength in numbers. The act itself requires Burmese ethnic groups to abandon isolationist tendencies and acknowledge shared grievances. For this to happen, an internal inclination to promote ethnic reconciliation under common goals and visions is imperative.

For multi-ethnic coalition-building to occur, Burmese ethnic groups must have the capacity to find a common ground. When responding to the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, Burmese ethnic organizations did not homogenize their goals and visions to fit under one umbrella. It was the ways in which Burmese Americans processed the recent military coup that cultivated a collective narrative for diasporic organizations to identify with. When respondents were asked about the recent military coup’s impact on the U.S. Burmese diaspora, a common

⁶⁴ Michael Haack, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 11, 2023.

⁶⁵ Khin Thiri Nandar Soe, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 3, 2023.

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theme among the responses was a narrative shift within U.S. diasporic activism—a re-examination and shared acknowledgement of the atrocities committed by the military. According to Eh Nay Thaw, one key narrative shift was the “the acknowledgement of persecution against ethnic minorities and the genocide against Rohingya Muslims.”⁶⁶ One catalyst for these acknowledgements is explained by Charlie, who points out that “the military under Min Aung Hlaing is killing Burmans. They suppress Christianity, but kill Buddhist monks. Civilians are realizing that this is the military’s nature—to kill their own people.”⁶⁷ The junta has killed Burman civilians and Buddhist monks during the military coup, despite promoting Burman supremacist and Buddhist nationalist ideologies. These acts of brutality led many Burmese civilians and diasporans to acknowledge that the military has not fundamentally changed from “the colors of past regimes,”⁶⁸ despite the democratic transition period. As Gum San Nsang stresses, “the military coup makes people aware that the facade of democracy was a temporary tactical move by the military. The mindset and brutality of the military regime remains fully intact.”⁶⁹ For Burmese ethnic groups who have been systematically persecuted for decades, the recent military coup only compounded existing advocacy efforts. As the military’s repression extended to the state’s key urban areas, violence against civilians was no longer contained. There was a growing realization among the Burmese (albeit, not all individuals) that the military neither accepted democracy or relinquished its power. They began to understand that the military’s persecution of ethnic minorities was a part of its divide and rule tactic, which was historically met with denial. These mutual understandings are a prerequisite to reconciliation and coalition-building. They promote humanizing rhetoric that validates the grievances of different

⁶⁶ Eh Nay Thaw, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 22, 2023.

⁶⁷ Charlie, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 14, 2023.

⁶⁸ Gum San Nsang, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 8, 2023.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

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ethnic groups while providing a common framework for ethnic groups to collaborate. Before the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, divisions on the acknowledgement of atrocities, such as the Rohingya Genocide, created factions within U.S. diasporic activism. Increased cross-ethnic dialogue has created new opportunities for collective action. The reconceptualization of inclusion within the movement initiated interactions between ethnic groups, opening up collective spaces for them to advocate alongside each other. As Eden points out, building collective action “takes a lot of dialogue between members of all different kinds of ethnic groups, including within their own ethnic groups and also together with other ethnic groups in the country.”⁷⁰

Along with cultivating a collective narrative, another crucial element of multi-ethnic coalition-building is defining the common goals and values of participating diasporic organizations. When asked about common agreements that shaped joint-advocacy frameworks against the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup, six of the organizations expressed their explicit opposition against the recent military coup and military regime. There is a mutual understanding among these organizations that the junta is not a negotiable party to reconcile or cohabitate with. This is supported by Skylar, who states, “Unless we can totally obliterate the military from Burma’s political system, the country won’t get ahead. No one that I know of wants reconciliation and negotiation with the military.”⁷¹ The eradication of the military regime is an irreconcilable stance within these cross-organizational partnerships. Another consensus among these organizations is the promotion of a multi-ethnic federal democracy, with the NUG supported as an actor to usher in a federal democracy after the junta is ousted. The cohesion of these goals provide a joint-advocacy framework for U.S. Burmese activist organizations to operate from, establishing a criteria that organizations can use to select which partnerships they

⁷⁰ Eden, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 7, 2023.

⁷¹ Skylar, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 7, 2023.

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prefer to pursue or avoid. Not only do these common goals allow for like-minded organizations to collaborate with one another, but they also provide common values that set ideological boundaries within coalitions. As Khin Thiri Nandar Soe puts it, “You have to respect human rights. That is the line that people cannot cross.”⁷² These boundaries set an inclusive tone for how the movement seeks to represent itself. For the U.S. Burmese diaspora, the Spring Revolution is not only a pro-democracy movement. It also seeks to afford equality and dignity to the individuals who were denied their humanity under Myanmar’s military rule. These boundaries demarcate differences within U.S. diasporic activism, setting limits for what attitudes and actions are acceptable or unacceptable under common goals and values.

Within multi-ethnic coalitions, ethnic groups are incorporated into collaborative structures that provide them with the flexibility to engage in different advocacy campaigns. In practice, ADM, BAG, and USACM operate as relatively informal coalitions with participation from different ethnic organizations. The structures of these coalitions allow ethnic groups to participate in collective decision-making to initiate and increase cross-ethnic dialogue. ADM has a fluid structure that allows organizations to ally with the coalition, depending on their interests in specific tasks. Khin Thiri Nandar Soe expresses that ADM “focuses on common values and tasks. Each group has their own autonomy in running their organization. We do not restrict or limit them in any way. When they come to work with us, they have a common agenda.”⁷³ By fostering collaboration based on tasks, organizations can participate in ADM on an ad-hoc basis. This structure allows ADM to broaden and narrow the scope of their tasks, which is strategic for forming alliances with organizations inside and outside of the diaspora. For example, ADM leverages the Southeast Asian identity to advocate for reforms in ASEAN because Southeast

⁷² Khin Thiri Nandar Soe, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 3, 2023.

⁷³ Ibid.

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Asian organizations tend to be focused on human rights issues in their respective countries of origin.⁷⁴ To work on tasks more specific to Myanmar, ADM prioritizes issues that ethnic groups have stakes in. Ad-hoc participation allows ADM to cater their tasks in alignment with the specific interests and priorities of their collaborators. This allows them to broaden tasks to garner collective support from non-diasporic organizations while setting other tasks that keep the coalition's goals centered on homeland activism. Van Kio also expressed that a fluid structure is strategic for BAG, as it allows organizations to create tasks for the coalition to adopt. He states, "Groups like the Chin, Kachin, Karenni, and Bamar, if they see something happening in their own township, they're all over. Many times, they would send statements to a group mail and ask us to place our signature."⁷⁵ Members of these ethnic groups share information about events occurring in their regions and coordinate responses within their respective organizations, which are delivered to BAG for support. The members have their own communication channels with CDM activists,⁷⁶ allowing BAG to maintain an indirect connection with on-the-ground networks through its coalition members. For USACM, representatives of ethnic organizations also participate under a fluid structure—collectively deliberating, organizing, and sharing tactics without a chain of command.⁷⁷ According to Alex, this allows USACM to "collaborate with different groups to advocate for campaigns in different states,"⁷⁸ which is strategic for maneuvering direct action and lobbying efforts in states that Burmese constituencies can reach. Technological advancements have optimized this process, as organizations can meet regularly on Zoom without geographical constraints and communicate on encrypted messenger applications with less security risks. These structures mark a step forward in strategic cooperation within the

⁷⁴ Skylar, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 7, 2023.

⁷⁵ Van Kio, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 17, 2023.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Michael Haack, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 11, 2023.

⁷⁸ Alex, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 10, 2023.

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Burmese diasporic advocacy space, but information asymmetry and remaining isolation between diasporic organizations continues to be a key challenge in coalition-building and cross-organizational campaigns.

B. Spiritual Networks: Religious Coalition-Building

Ethnic-oriented churches have long-served as community centers, providing a focal location for Burmese Christians in the diaspora to congregate. These churches are most prevalent among the Chin, Kachin, and Karen, who are predominantly Christian. A significant number of the churches are Baptist and affiliated with ABCUSA, which has a 200 year old legacy of carrying out missionary work in Myanmar. ABCUSA established the Burma Refugee Commission to advocate for humanitarian efforts in Myanmar's Chin, Kachin, and Karen states, which predates the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup. Following the recent military coup, BAG was formed as a sub-committee under the Burma Refugee Commission.⁷⁹ Van Kio expresses that ABCUSA's influence has been instrumental in connecting BAG with U.S. officials and other Baptist Americans.⁸⁰ He states, "When we go into churches, community centers, or Zoom meetings with well-established leaders from America, it is huge. It is a booming voice, the American Baptist Association has done this for so long."⁸¹ ABCUSA has a significant presence within the landscape of Baptist denominations across the United States. Not only do they have a substantial number of member churches and affiliated congregations among Burmese Christians, but they also maintain an extensive network of Baptist communities outside of the diaspora. This allows BAG to reach these networks and mobilize support among Baptists through shared religious beliefs. When there are states or localities without a sizable Burmese population, ABCUSA can connect BAG with member churches and affiliates. This allows BAG to lobby for

⁷⁹ Van Kio, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 17, 2023.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ibid.

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U.S.-Myanmar foreign policy with the influence of ABCUSA's Baptist constituencies.⁸²

Religious coalition-building has the capacity to promote reconciliation within the diaspora by easing religious tensions. BAG's coalition also includes nonsectarian organizations, which enables them to navigate religious divisions by including a secular lens to their advocacy efforts.

C. Civilian Government in Exile: The CRPH, NUCC, and NUG

Collaboration with the CRPH, NUCC, and NUG can be informal or formal, depending on the degree to which diasporic organizations engage with these bodies. As the NUG continues to engage in diplomatic efforts with the U.S. government, U.S. Burmese activist organizations have the ability to mobilize Burmese Americans to advocate on the NUG's behalf. These organizations may have direct or indirect connections with townships and regions in Myanmar, which is useful for the civilian government in exile to receive on-the-ground updates and coordinate with on-the-ground actors. The relationship between the civilian government in exile and U.S. diasporic organizations tends to be mutual. These organizations can actively shape the civilian government in exile's responses to the recent military coup, particularly through foreign affairs.

ADM, BAG, CCI, and USACM have an informal relationship with the civilian government in exile. While the nature of these collaborations are unofficial, they play an important role in connecting the U.S. Burmese diaspora to the civilian government in exile. The civilian government in exile has worked with these organizations to share information and receive advice on foreign affairs. For example, the NUG has sought foreign policy advice from ADM⁸³ and receives updates on the Chin State through CCI.⁸⁴ Dr. Sasa (Minister of International Cooperation) and U Aung Kyi Nyunt (CRPH Chairman) have met with BAG to discuss how the

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Khin Thiri Nandar Soe, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 3, 2023.

⁸⁴ Charlie, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 14, 2023.

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coalition could assist their goals.⁸⁵ U.S. diasporic organizations have also helped the NUG coordinate meetings with U.S. officials and Burmese Americans. When U.S. Representatives Ted Lieu and Brad Sherman expressed concerns about the NUG's stance on the Rohingya Genocide, USACM set up a meeting with NUG officials, U.S. officials, and Rohingya leaders from the diaspora.⁸⁶ These collaborations go beyond information exchange and political coordination, as they also enable the NUG to interact with the U.S. Burmese diaspora and mobilize collective support. For example, ADM helped organize a speaker event for Daw Zin Mar Aung (Minister of Foreign Affairs) and U Moe Zaw Oo (Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs) in San Francisco.⁸⁷ Within the Chin community, CCI hosted an event for Chin National Day that was attended by NUG officials.⁸⁸ These coordinated interactions allow the NUG to directly connect with the U.S. Burmese diaspora and strengthen its ties among Burmese Americans. While facilitating these interactions, U.S. diasporic organizations are able to amplify the diaspora's collective voice when influencing the NUG's affairs. These informal relationships serve as a vital bridge between the civilian government in exile and the U.S. Burmese diaspora, allowing Burmese Americans to shape the Spring Revolution from overseas.

KA, as a founding member of KPICT, has a formal relationship with the civilian government in exile. KPICT is a transnational coordinating body for the Kachin State in Myanmar, composed of Kachin diasporic and domestic organizations. While serving as President of KA, Gum San Nsang is also the Secretary General of KPICT. According to Gum San Nsang, KPICT has a bilateral agreement with the CRPH in the formation of the NUCC and NUG.⁸⁹ KPICT predates and co-founded the NUCC and NUG, giving KA a formal relationship with the

⁸⁵ Van Kio, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 17, 2023.

⁸⁶ Alex, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 10, 2023.

⁸⁷ Khin Thiri Nandar Soe, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 3, 2023.

⁸⁸ Charlie, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 14, 2023.

⁸⁹ Gum San Nsang, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 8, 2023.

civilian government in exile through KPICT. In the Kachin State, KPICT works with an EAO called the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), which has an armed wing known as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA).⁹⁰ In tandem, KPICT coordinates with KIO and KIA to support the PDF, CDM activists, and defectors.⁹¹ Additionally, several KPICT members are in the NUG: Duwa Lashi La (Acting President, Vice President), Dr. Tu Hkwang (Minister of Natural Resources and Environmental Conservation), David Gum Awng (Deputy Minister of International Cooperation), and Ja Htoi Pan (Deputy Minister of Education). Through these relationships, KA has been able to leverage its network with on-the-ground Kachin leaders and organizations to create a transnational Kachin coalition with formal ties to the civilian government in exile. Not only does KA help coordinate on-the-ground assistance through KPICT, but these bilateral efforts open a channel for them to increase the representation of Kachins in the formation and operations of the civilian government in exile. This has also optimized information channels between both bodies and their connections with EAOs and CDM activists.

IX. Political Lobbying

A. United States Foreign Policy: The BURMA Act

Political lobbying is a common tactic for U.S. Burmese activist organizations participating in the Spring Revolution. As the U.S. remains a global superpower, it wields immense influence in setting a precedent for foreign policy measures on Myanmar. Since the NUG is not an American institution, Burmese Americans have played an important role in activating the U.S. government's stake in supporting the NUG. As a voting bloc, Burmese Americans are within the sphere of influence to pressure U.S. officials into engaging with their

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

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demands. U.S. Burmese activist organizations have played a role in drafting amendments, meeting with U.S. officials, and mobilizing the diaspora to lobby for U.S.-Myanmar foreign policy. Some of these diasporic organizations have engaged in joint-advocacy efforts, which highlights the collaborative nature of political lobbying structures within the U.S. Burmese diaspora. These crossovers demonstrate a willingness to cooperate, share resources, and advocate under a shared political discourse.

One of the most significant political lobbying campaigns in the U.S. Burmese diaspora was for the Burma Unified through Rigorous Military Accountability Act (BURMA Act), which was passed as an amendment under the National Defense Authorization Act of 2023 (NDAA). The BURMA Act in the NDAA was a modified version of the original BURMA Act of 2021, which was a revision of the proposed BURMA Act of 2019. The BURMA Act of 2021 was introduced by U.S. Representative Gregory Meeks (D,⁹² New York) and failed to reach the Senate floor after passing in the U.S. House. Afterwards, U.S. Representative Meeks placed the bill in the NDAA, which was amended and unanimously passed in 2022. The NDAA's BURMA Act contains key measures for U.S.-Myanmar foreign policy. First, it states the U.S. policy stance of supporting democracy, human rights, and justice in Myanmar.⁹³ This includes humanitarian assistance, as well as support for the CRPH, NUCC, NUG, and CDM.⁹⁴ Second, it authorizes sanctions on junta affiliates and the majority of the junta's state-owned enterprises.⁹⁵ Third, it strengthens the United Nation's response to the recent military coup, mentioning that Russia and China are complicit in supporting Myanmar's junta.⁹⁶ Fourth, it authorizes appropriations for assisting Myanmar. This includes programs to support federalism, ethnic

⁹² "D" denotes Democrat.

⁹³ United States Congress. "Text - H.R.7776 - 117th Congress (2021-2022): James M. Inhofe National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023." *Library of Congress*, 2022.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

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reconciliation, pro-democracy organizations, civil society organizations (CSOs), EAOs, humanitarian aid, and the PDF.⁹⁷ Finally, it authorizes technical assistance for documenting and addressing human rights abuses.⁹⁸

The passage of NDAA's BURMA Act is attributed to nearly 2 years worth of activism within the U.S. Burmese diaspora. The BURMA Act of 2021 was not merely introduced by U.S. Representative Meeks—U.S. Burmese activist organizations took it upon themselves to revise the 2019 version to address the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup. When the original bill from 2021 ceased to make progress out of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, USACM brought Burmese constituencies to over 70 Senate offices, leveraging the influence of these constituents in different states.⁹⁹ When there were states with sparse Burmese constituencies, ABCUSA helped BAG organize Baptist pastors to reach the office of Senators.¹⁰⁰ GM4MD also mobilized Burmese youth to join lobbying efforts by utilizing social media platforms (i.e. TikTok and Instagram) to increase awareness of the BURMA Act.¹⁰¹ The primary targets of lobbying efforts were Senate Republicans, as majority support from Senate Democrats was expected. BAG, in coordination with CCI and ABCUSA, targeted Senator Todd Young (R,¹⁰² Indiana) for his support as a member of the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations.¹⁰³ Since Indiana has a large Chin constituency, CCI played an instrumental role in mobilizing Chins to write letters to Senator Young's office, advocating for the BURMA Act to leave the committee for a vote.¹⁰⁴ According to Charlie, an important strategy in lobbying for the BURMA Act was utilizing the

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Michael Haack. "How the BURMA Act Passed Congress." *Frontier Myanmar*, 2023.

¹⁰⁰ Van Kio, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 17, 2023.

¹⁰¹ Eden, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 7, 2023.

¹⁰² "R" denotes Republican.

¹⁰³ Van Kio, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 17, 2023.

¹⁰⁴ Charlie, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 14, 2023.

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power of constituencies to exert pressure on Senators—of whom, have electoral incentives.¹⁰⁵ In tandem with CCI, BAG leveraged ABCUSA’s political influence to set up meetings with Senator Young’s office, which included Baptist pastors and community leaders.¹⁰⁶ Through collective lobbying efforts, the BURMA Act, with Senator Young’s support, was added to the NDAA by U.S. Representative Meeks. Nevertheless, U.S. Burmese activist organizations believed that receiving approval from Senator Young was not enough. Van Kio pointed out that Senator Mitch McConnell (R, Kentucky) had immense influence on the Republican Party’s platform, controlling which bills received his approval.¹⁰⁷ For this reason, these diasporic organizations also had community leaders in Kentucky meet with Senator McConnell.

Some of the amendments in the NDAA’s BURMA Act were led by U.S. diasporic organizations, allowing them to shape the legislation itself. On the west coast, Skylar worked with Save Myanmar and Los Angeles Myanmar Movement to draft amendments to the bill.¹⁰⁸ Their amendment team met with Senators to petition for language revisions and policy measures. Skylar stated that the original bill contained minimal language on the civilian government in exile, which the team petitioned to expand.¹⁰⁹ BAG, CCI, and KA advocated for revisions to the original bill, notably the inclusion of assistance for ethnic minority groups. The NDAA’s BURMA Act was perceived as successful by ADM, BAG, CCI, and KA, who expressed that the majority of their preferred amendments were approved in the Senate. Nevertheless, Michael Haack notes that concessions were made in the amendment process to secure votes from Senate Republicans.¹¹⁰ For example, one widely-supported measure among U.S. Burmese activist organizations is imposing U.S. sanctions on the Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise—a key source

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Van Kio, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 17, 2023.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Skylar, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 7, 2023.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Michael Haack. “How the BURMA Act Passed Congress.” *Frontier Myanmar*, 2023.

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of revenue for Myanmar's junta. The NDAA's BURMA Act authorized the president to enact sanctions on the enterprise, but did not mandate it. Despite these limitations, Michael Haack believes that the legislation is one of the most robust improvements in U.S.-Myanmar foreign policy.¹¹¹ He mentions that its success could be attributed to the power that lies in a "new, more open, and diverse coalition."¹¹² The NDAA's BURMA Act, as Van Kio puts it, is only the beginning of the diaspora's momentum in advocating for the Spring Revolution.¹¹³ Diasporic organizations are utilizing similar lobbying tactics and strategies to garner support for other foreign policy measures.

B. Political Education and Direct Action

Burmese Americans have participated in direct action efforts to raise awareness of the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup and exert pressure on U.S. officials to support U.S.-Myanmar foreign policy. These direct action efforts mainly take the form of peaceful protests in front of government buildings. These protests are intended to augment political lobbying efforts and spark political activation within the diaspora. When asked about existing constraints in U.S. diasporic activism, Skylar expressed that there is an ongoing need for political education among Burmese Americans, particularly those with language barriers and inadequate knowledge of the American political system.¹¹⁴ Gum San Nsang stressed that maintaining the Kachin consciousness is vital to sustaining generational activism among Kachins.¹¹⁵ For this reason, organizations like ADM, CCI, and KA organize and/or participate in protests to politically activate Burmese Americans, increase political awareness within the diaspora, and advocate for policy measures. The effects of direct action can be identified as "inside-out" or "outside-in,"

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Van Kio, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 17, 2023.

¹¹⁴ Skylar, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 7, 2023.

¹¹⁵ Gum San Nsang, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 8, 2023.

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illustrating the interplay between internal dynamics and external responses in U.S. diasporic activism. The inside-out effect occurs when Burmese Americans are able to act as agents of change through direct action efforts, which can materially (if successful) or immaterially (symbolically) deliver political remittances to their homeland. The outside-in effect occurs when direct action efforts allow Burmese Americans to increase their political knowledge through exposure and consistent involvement. For protests to occur effectively, Burmese Americans must have the political consciousness and awareness to participate in direct action efforts as changemakers.

X. Cross-Border Assistance

Two primary tactics in cross-border assistance are 1) sending raised funds to parties with the capacity to deliver humanitarian aid, and 2) coordinating information gathering and resource mobilization with on-the-ground actors. Depending on existing ties with on-the-ground actors, coordination may be facilitated through direct or indirect parties. For this reason, U.S. Burmese activist organizations may have different constraints when engaging in cross-border assistance, as it requires delivering material resources through secure networks that may be at the risk of military interception.

A. Economic Remittances

A common tactic among U.S. Burmese activist organizations is raising funds for humanitarian relief or the Spring Revolution. This can take the form of hosting in-person fundraising events, promoting the sale of bonds issued by the NUG, and using online fundraising platforms. These funds are often sent to CSOs, NGOs, nonprofit organizations, or on-the-ground actors, who disperse the funds in Myanmar. A lot of these organizations tend to be located near the Thai-Myanmar border. Due to widespread displacement and destabilization in rural regions,

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many organizations deliver humanitarian relief to assist camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs). IAK has been raising funds for Karen IDPs since December of 2020, when the military executed an armed campaign against the Karen National Liberation Army in eastern Karen State.¹¹⁶ While IAK does not have a stance on armed ethnic resistance, Eh Nay Thaw expressed, “The issue of the displacements was ignored by the larger media. So, in response, we raised funds to meet the humanitarian needs.”¹¹⁷ Since IAK has communication channels in the Karen State, they were able to deliver humanitarian aid in response to localized issues that went largely unnoticed by the international stage. The recent military coup exacerbated humanitarian conditions in the Karen State, which required immediate attention and coordinated efforts. For this reason, IAK shifted from running ad-hoc fundraising campaigns to regularly delivering humanitarian relief under a formalized structure.¹¹⁸ However, Eh Nay Thaw explains that there are existing constraints in delivering funds through legal channels, particularly due to the costly fees associated with private transactions.¹¹⁹ For KA, the use of blockchain technology has been effective in delivering funds to on-the-ground actors.¹²⁰ Blockchain allows KA to make tamper resistant transactions with enhanced security measures, preventing the military from identifying the source of transactions and intercepting them. KA has been able to raise over \$800,000, amassing sizable donations to support CDM activists, IDPs, and EAOs in the Kachin State.¹²¹ Overall, the collection of funds starts on the community level while the delivery of funds relies on transnational networks facilitated by direct or indirect parties.

¹¹⁶ Eh Nay Thaw, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 22, 2023.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Gum San Nsang, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 8, 2023.

¹²¹ Ibid.

B. On-the-Ground Coordination

U.S. Burmese activist organizations also coordinate with on-the-ground actors to share information and provide resources. KA has active on-the-ground networks in the Kachin State, which enables them to deliver resources to IDPs and individuals affected by the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup. KPICT collaborates with the NUG to support over 600 IDPs in the Kachin State, including parliamentarians and CDM activists who fled from the junta.¹²² KPICT and KIO fully sponsor and fund defection camps in liberated zones, providing defectors with food and shelter under their custody.¹²³ KPICT works with hospitals to provide medical treatment and operates the NUG University under its stewardship.¹²⁴ These resources are partly funded from revenue generated by NUG treasury bonds that are returned to Myanmar.¹²⁵ On-the-ground coordination is also facilitated through KIO and KIA, who support the PDF and assist defectors.¹²⁶ These groups are in active communication and working relations, allowing for the transnational flow of information and resources. IAK also maintains a close organizational relationship with local groups and community members in the Karen State, relying on their mutual connections to discuss updates on the status of the region and facilitate humanitarian assistance.¹²⁷ These transnational relationships are maintained, not only through globalized networks and communication channels, but through continuous engagement with communities in the homeland.

XI. Conclusion

After decades of protracted civil conflict and military brutality, the 2021 Myanmar Military Coup has activated a new wave of homeland activism. From overseas, Burmese

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Eh Nay Thaw, interviewed by Diane Chao, March 22, 2023.

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Americans have responded through acts of resistance and solidarity, perceiving themselves in a social movement that transcends the military's divide and rule tactics. The Spring Revolution in the U.S. Burmese diaspora does not operate under the same modal and ideological conventions of precursive social movements. Rather, it is influenced by a belief system that seeks to contest exclusive conceptualizations of democracy, human rights, and justice that were left widely unaddressed before the recent military coup. The goals, visions, tactics, and strategies of U.S. Burmese activist organizations do not only explain the nature of their external responses. The choices and decisions that inform each response also explains how the diaspora has sought inward change. The development of multi-ethnic coalitions was facilitated by collective narratives, shared agendas, and collaborative structures that initiate ethnic reconciliation and inclusion. The civilian government in exile has opened transnational opportunity structures for diasporic organizations to influence foreign affairs and coordinate with on-the-ground actors to assist Burmese civilians. When these diasporic organizations believed that U.S. foreign policy on Myanmar was inadequate, they banded together and mobilized Burmese Americans to exert pressure on the U.S. Congress. Despite the nature of gridlock under the American two-party system, Burmese Americans learned how to strategize their lobbying efforts to help pass the NDAA's BURMA Act with bipartisan and unanimous support. On-the-ground assistance would be far more constrained if Burmese Americans did not establish and maintain transnational relationships with on-the-ground actors. It is through these transnational networks that Burmese Americans were able to deliver political and economic remittances to their homeland. These forms of activism are not mutually exclusive from one another. Oftentimes, they have been combined and harmonized in ways that reinforce each other. It is also important to note that the U.S. Burmese diaspora's responses do not necessarily mirror that of on-the-ground activists. The

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complexities of ethnic reconciliation and regime change are complicated by the internal dynamics of Burmese civilians in Myanmar, which is important for scholars to further evaluate. There is much more scholarship that needs to be done on a topic that has been overlooked and reduced by defeatist discourses. However, the U.S. Burmese diaspora remains optimistic, as many Burmese activists believe that there is *no alternative beyond resistance*.

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