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Education Reform in Post-Coup Myanmar: Federalizing or Federating?

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Since Myanmar transitioned from direct military rule in 2011, successive governments have attempted to decentralize the primary and higher education systems through top-down "federalizing" initiatives. However, these efforts have largely failed. However, following the February 2021 military coup, the absence of a credible central education authority has led ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and non-state actors, including local communities, to provide education to up to one million of the most vulnerable and conflict-affected children. This represents a new "federating" moment for education in Myanmar, where capacity and alliances are built from the bottom up and which could potentially endure after the ongoing conflict ends. This article explores Myanmar's

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complex and contested education system since the coup, analysing the difference between "federalizing" and "federating" approaches. It compares the pre- and post-coup approaches to illustrate the importance of an adaptive, bottom-up approach based on local ownership and resilience.

Keywords: federalism, decentralization, non-state education, peace, Myanmar military coup.

The impact of conflict on education in Myanmar is profound, dynamic and understudied.[1] Since independence, the education system has been dominated by the Burmese language and the traditions of the Burman ethnic majority as part of the broader "Burmanization" of a diverse country of more than 130 ethnic groups. Following a peace process between the central government and some of the numerous ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) initiated in 2011, education reform did receive some attention from the central authorities. Between 2016 and 2021, the semi-civilian government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD) also identified education as a critical area for reform. However, these attempts at "federalizing" the education system through limited decentralization largely failed. However, following the military coup that ousted the NLD government in 2021, various local actors, including EAOs and non-state entities, have stepped in to provide education for up to one million of the country's most vulnerable and conflict-affected children.[2] These efforts represent a new bottom-up, "federating" moment for Myanmar's education system.

The official list of 135 "national races" (*taingyintha*) is deeply problematic because it represents arbitrary categories of identity, but it does give an idea of Myanmar's ethnolinguistic diversity.[3] For decades, various actors, including the EAOs, have engaged in conflict with predominantly urban and Burman-dominated central governments to defend their respective lands and identities. At the same time, many of these EAOs have developed their own functional subnational governance administrations, including education departments that provide primary and higher education. Since the 2021 coup, these education systems have become crucial components of a nascent federalized education system built from the ground up.

The establishment of locally run education systems has long been a long-standing priority for Myanmar's ethnic communities in their fight against militarization and centralization and in their quest for federalism. As a system for dividing and sharing power

between a central (federal or union) government and state or regional (or "subnational") governments, federalism is a contentious topic in Myanmar.[4] Debates have often focused on the distribution of administrative powers and the definition of federalism along ethno-territorial lines since ethnic communities are spread across different areas of the country and often live side by side with other ethnic groups. However, the post-coup environment has shifted the focus from a top-down approach—the central government designs and implements a constitutional solution—to a bottom-up notion of federalism that is now being experimented by the EAOs, civil society organizations (CSOs) and local communities.

Federalism can emerge through a "federating process"—joining independent units in a union—or a "federalizing process"—a central authority grants constitutional autonomy to local or regional entities.[5] Examples include the thirteen North American colonies forming the federal United States in 1789 (a federating process) and the creation of the German Empire in 1871 (a federalizing process). Achieving federalism through the radical decentralization of a pre-existing unitary state remains rare. Forms of devolution have occurred recently in the United Kingdom and Spain, but they reflect historic territorial divisions and concepts of nationality.[6]

Ethnic nationalities in Myanmar emphasize that they were historically independent of the pre-colonial Burman monarchy, while colonial rule further consolidated their identities.[7] The British colonial authorities patronized certain ethnic minorities, such as the Karen, which developed a modern national identity during colonial rule.[8] However, the association of some ethnic nationality elites with British colonialism was problematic post-independence and the failure to create inclusive political structures during the colonial period (1885–1948) set the stage for ongoing ethnic conflicts.

Contemporary narratives about ethnic politics remain influenced by two conferences in Panglong, a small town in southern Shan State, in 1946 (under British auspices) and February 1947. According to Matthew Walton, when modern-era ethnic nationality leaders call for "a return to the spirit of Panglong", it encodes conflicting versions of the 1947 Panglong Conference in Shan State that laid the foundation for Myanmar's independence and for a new constitution that would create the Union of Burma (1948–62).[9] Despite having fought for independence, many ethnic groups—especially those from lowland areas of the country, known as "Ministerial Burma", that were ruled directly by the authorities in Rangoon (Yangon)—were

absent from the conference.[10] Nonetheless, it was a foundational moment in Myanmar's history. Although the Panglong Agreement did not use the language of federalism, it recognized the "internal autonomy" of ethnic states. Hence, for many ethnic groups, it symbolized a decision to come together (a "federating process") to form a newly independent union. However, representatives of the Burman majority—in particular, the military—argued that the country was ethnically united and harmonious before the British arrived and destroyed it. For these Burmans, the Panglong Agreement was the manifestation of the historic unity between the ethnic minorities and the Burman majority that had achieved independence. For them, the 1947 accord offered only guarantees from a central government of autonomy to ethnic groups, making it a "federalizing" moment. These fundamentally different historical narratives continue to impact discussions on federalism in Myanmar.

Negotiations leading to independence repeatedly referred to a voluntary federating process, with the "right to secession" enshrined in the 1947 Constitution. However, once the Constituent Assembly convened later that year, the process effectively became decentralization within an expanded Ministerial Burma. The failures of the Panglong Conference and the subsequent centralized rule after the military's 1962 coup meant no federation arrangement existed in Myanmar before the 2021 coup, although some elements of the 2008 Constitution could have moved the country slightly towards federalization.[11]

This article proceeds as follows. The following section describes attempts to create a more federal education system before the 2021 coup. It then explores the post-coup situation and the open space for a more federating approach. The article concludes with a reflection on the opportunities and challenges moving forward.

Myanmar's Education System Before the 2021 Coup

Since at least the 1960s, the suppression of ethnic minority languages and cultures within a centralizing, militarized state dominated by the Burman majority has been a primary grievance driving armed conflicts. In response, several EAOs have developed basic and further education systems that preserve and reproduce their languages and cultures. Some have partnered with civil society actors, particularly Christian and Buddhist associations and literature and culture committees.[12] International support following the 1988

pro-democracy uprising, which initiated a slow path towards limited democratization, enabled the expansion of EAO education regimes, especially in the Karen, Mon and Kachin areas. Before the 2021 coup, the Karen National Union—the political wing of the Karen National Liberation Army—and its Karen Education and Culture Department directly supported more than 1,500 schools.

A Deep-Seated Legacy of Centralization

Before 2021, Myanmar's education system was highly centralized. The 2008 Constitution categorized education under "Schedule One", a list of administrative areas centrally controlled and without direct representation within state or region-level parliaments. Consequently, whereas the transport and forestry ministries had a state or region-level counterpart, state or region-level education departments could only "informally coordinate"[13] with state or region-level governments through the Ministry of Social Affairs.[14] These education departments could only function within existing policy frameworks and could not act independently. Dominated by the Burman majority, the central government, per the 2008 Constitution, mandated that Burmese be the language of instruction in all schools.[15]

The 2014 National Education Law stipulated that only schools teaching the national curriculum for basic education would be recognized as "legal schools".[16] Thus, before the 2021 coup, the basic education system was divided between centralized education that was recognized by the national government and non-centrally controlled education that was unrecognized. For example, the Ministry of Education did not formally recognize any provider delivering a non-Burman-based curriculum or an international curriculum, such as the International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE). This lack of recognition affected the learning process due to a lack of teacher recognition or state funding, and it limited students' learning pathways. The end-of-high-school exam was the only path from basic education to the government's higher education institutes. This was curriculum-based and only available to students in recognized schools. Without this curriculum-based matriculation certificate, students' future learning and job opportunities were restricted. There were some non-state higher education options available for students from non-recognized schools, but there were only a few, and most employers did not recognize certificates from these schools.

Centralized control over education has a long history in Myanmar, dating back to the British colonial era. English was the language of instruction because the colonial authorities wanted English-speaking administrators.[17] Post-independence, under successive military dictatorships between 1962 and 2011, education became a means to impose a sense of unity across a disparate country and to strengthen the military's rule.[18] After 2011, when Thein Sein, a retired general, was elected as the first semi-civilian president since 1962, education was a key pillar of reform, although minimal progress was made towards decentralization.

The Pedagogical and Political Consequences of Centralization

A centralized education system has significant and interlinked pedagogical and political consequences. Pedagogically, children who do not speak the official language (Burmese) as their mother tongue face compromised learning opportunities. They either struggle to understand what is being taught in government-recognized schools or attend an unrecognized school where they understand the lessons but where their educational outcomes are unacknowledged by the central state, restricting their access to higher education and jobs.[19]

At best, a non-Burmese-speaking child in a recognized school is less familiar with the national language than their mother tongue. At worst, they do not understand it at all. This means that they cannot fully grasp the foundational concepts that allow someone to learn basic literacy and numeracy, leaving the child without a firm basis on which to understand more advanced skills. By comparison, delivering education in a child's mother tongue allows them to build these foundational concepts, which can later help them learn the national language. This approach, known as Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), is internationally recognized as the most cost-effective way for children who do not speak the national language to be able to excel in school.[20]

Politically, a centrally managed education system perpetuates an inequitable society by maintaining the dominance of the ethnic majority over already disadvantaged minorities. The central government's perceived disregard for minority identities and its promotion of Burman culture and language ("Burmanization") have fuelled Myanmar's ethnic conflicts since the 1950s. Ethnic nationality communities view the national education system as a tool of assimilation and marginalization.[21] These inequalities became stark and weaponized as Myanmar began to democratize in the 2010s.

Pre-Coup Attempts to Federalize

Between 2011 and 2021, successive quasi-civilian governments began to reform the national education system. Reforms in the National Education Strategic Plan of 2016 were wide-ranging and acknowledged the importance of decentralization, while the NLD government (2016–21) identified education as essential to creating a peaceful, prosperous and democratic country.[22] It undertook tentative steps towards more inclusive and quality education while moving away from the pedagogical and political disadvantages of the previous system (such as those discussed above). These developments were significant in acknowledging the diversity of Myanmar's students, but their implementation was slow and uneven, highlighting the limitations of the top-down federalization process.

Despite maintaining the centralizing ethos that all schools must follow the national curriculum, the National Education Law of 2014 introduced a semblance of decentralization. It allowed non-Burmese languages to be used in classrooms. "An ethnic language can be used alongside Myanmar [Burmese] as a language of instruction at the basic education level", it stated.[23] Pedagogically, this was a positive move because it allowed teachers to use a student's mother tongue to explain basic concepts. However, because of the 2008 Constitution, the official language of instruction and assessment remained Burmese. Consequently, all textbooks, tests and exams were still in Burmese, meaning the education system continued to benefit Burmese speakers and limited opportunities for non-Burmese speakers. Compounding the problem, most qualified teachers did not speak a minority language.[24] At best, the new provisions acknowledged diversity but did not address the pedagogical barriers to learning foundation skills in minority languages.[25]

The National Education Law of 2014 also granted "freedom to develop the curriculum in each region based on the curriculum standards".[26] This allowed 20 per cent of the national curriculum to be defined at the state or regional level. In principle, the languages and history of ethnic minorities could be taught. However, this provision was not effectively operationalized. For instance, the 2016–2021 National Education Strategic Plan sought to create local curricula, but by 2021, the scheme had only been piloted in five ethnic states. Many of the smaller ethnic groups lacked funding and technical support to develop their own curricula.[27]

Moreover, the drafts of the National Education Law sparked protests by students who objected to the continuing centralization.

A coalition of student groups operating under the National Network for Education Reform submitted an 11-point proposal that, among other demands, called for the promotion of ethnic languages. Education activists and students organized public protests in the county's major cities and a march to Yangon in January 2015. The government subsequently cracked down on the demonstrations, resulting in the arrest of hundreds of protesters.[28] However, it did amend the National Education Law in 2015, although the National Network for Education Reform and the All Burma Federation of Student Unions argued that less than 10 per cent of their demands were included in the revisions.

Peace and Education—Towards a Partnership Agreement?

Starting in 2011, President Thein Sein's government and the military agreed or reaffirmed ceasefires with 10 of the 11 largest EAOs, culminating in the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015. However, not all EAOs signed up to the accord. That included the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), whose 17-year ceasefire with the military broke down in 2011 when the military attacked it.[29]

The NCA seemingly offered a basis for political dialogue. In 2016, the NLD's Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto head of the semi-civilian government that took power the same year, convened the Union Peace Conferences, which was billed as the "21st Century Panglong". (Suu Kyi is the daughter of Aung San, the pro-independence leader who led the negotiations for the original Panglong Agreement with the ethnic groups in 1947.[30]) However, Suu Kyi was less successful than her father in attempting to reach a grand nation-building pact. After some initial success, the idea of a new federal framework for Myanmar was undermined and suppressed by the military.[31]

Before the 2021 coup, the NLD government was working with the education departments of the Karen National Union and the New Mon State Party, the political wings of two EAOs, to develop a framework to recognize mother tongue-based curricula.[32] This framework notably excluded requirements for children to study the Burmese language and Burman history and music. These three subjects were identified as being the most culturally problematic among ethnic minorities.[33] The framework was near finalization when the military launched its coup on 1 February 2021. It might have resulted in a more decentralized and inclusive education model if it had been operationalized. Moreover, while the initial discussions

were only with the educational departments of two EAOs, there was the expectation that it would have been expanded to include more ethnic groups.

Why Did These Attempts Fail?

Despite the transition to elected, semi-civilian governments in 2011, the internal mechanics of power remained largely unchanged from the era of military dictatorships. The military-drafted 2008 Constitution ensured that the armed forces automatically controlled 25 per cent of parliamentary seats. Support from 75 per cent of lawmakers is needed to pass the most consequential bills, meaning the military had an effective veto over government policy. Moreover, decentralization was anathema to the military's vision of a unified Myanmar, while elected politicians also opposed significant decentralization in education and beyond.

Although the education system was not an explicit component of the peace process between 2012 and 2021, it became politicized because of the interrelatedness of education and identity. Thus, few politicians within the NLD government wanted to court the political controversy that came from promoting sensitive topics related to ethnic identities, such as language or cultural heritage.[34] For example, the NLD government was expected to update the National Education Strategic Plan in early 2021, just before the coup. Despite some drafts of the plan including MTB-MLE approaches, the final pre-coup version prepared for parliament cut out most of the proposed decentralizing schemes.

The overarching problem was "top-down" reform of the education system, with the central government attempting to introduce decentralized elements into a centralized system.[35] Critical non-state actors were rarely included in the process, nor was there even a coherent or shared idea of what a decentralized education system should look like. What efforts were made largely failed. The NLD government introduced limited ethnic language and cultural-historical material into the curriculum—mostly out of school hours—in five ethnic states but was largely unsuccessful because of a lack of resources, insufficient political will, and the inherent difficulty of this task.[36] Cynically, it could be argued that Myanmar's governments only tolerated discussions about decentralizing the education system to satisfy international donors, on which Myanmar relied for financial support during the 2010s and which advocated for improved learning opportunities[37].

As such, before 2021, Myanmar partially attempted to "federalize" a unitary (centrally administered and Burman-dominated) education system, an experiment that largely failed. However, since the 2021 coup, attempts have been made to build a new education system based on locally run schools and colleges, representing a "federating" process.

Myanmar's Education System after the 2021 Coup

The February 2021 military coup created a power vacuum, resulting in the absence of any governing entity fully controlling the national education system. This vacuum has allowed for the emergence of localized, subnational education providers. Instead of trying to federalize a unified state, as attempted before 2021, the post-coup environment has facilitated the development of a federated education system that may become a driver of peace.

According to official figures, student enrolment in government schools (grades 1–12) dropped from 9 million to 5.7 million in the first year after the coup. In the subsequent 2023 and 2024 academic years, it declined by another 750,000. Approximately 30 per cent of government teachers were dismissed for participating in the civil disobedience movement (CDM) that erupted following the coup.[38] Teachers, after medical workers, were the second-largest group of civil servants who participated in the CDM.[39] Since February 2021, progressive education reforms have stagnated or been abandoned, especially after international development partners withdrew technical assistance and funding.

Myanmar now has two opposing political regimes—the military's State Administration Council (SAC) and the anti-junta National Unity Government (NUG)—each reflecting opposing educational approaches. The SAC has reversed earlier attempts to federalize education, reinforcing the centralized and Burman-centric system. For instance, the SAC's National Education Law of 2023 eliminated provisions for using ethnic languages in classrooms and teaching local curricula in government-recognized schools.[40] Additionally, the SAC's Private School Law in 2023, unlike the 2017 draft, imposes strict regulations on all non-government schools, while the Organization Registration Law of 2022 requires all social organizations to register with the junta, making unregistered associations illegal. Interactions with ethnic education providers that are not officially registered—in most cases, they cannot register—are illegal and carry severe penalties. The updated National Education Strategic Plan affirmed

the SAC's centralized vision of education and removed all aspects of decentralization.

In contrast, the NUG has sought to continue federalizing the education sector. Its 2023 Federal Education Policy—developed with the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC), an NUG advisory body that includes several ethnic groups—outlines a decentralized system reflecting the self-determination of states.[41] Formed after consultation with various stakeholders, including ethnic education providers, this policy proposes a state-based framework allowing for local requirements, such as using ethnic languages in classrooms. However, while inspiring, the NUG's approach still follows a top-down federalizing approach, highlighting the challenges of "centralized decentralization". Those problems include questions on calculating state-level funding from a central budget and the deficit of qualified teachers who speak non-Burmese languages and could support an MTB-MLE approach.

The NUG includes several non-Burman leaders from CSOs and EAOs, although most occupy deputy ministerial positions. Unusual for Myanmar, it also includes a relatively large number of women in key leadership positions. However, the NUG's Federal Education Policy was developed with limited input from EAO education departments and largely ignores the realities of education provision on the ground, focusing instead on a future federal education system that could be created if the NUG one day rules the whole country.[42] This has led to tensions between the NUG and some ethnic education providers.

An Opportunity to Federate

The post-coup power vacuum has created opportunities to federate in the education system. Various community actors, including the education departments of EAOs and other community-based organizations with long histories of delivering education provisions, have stepped in to address the immediate needs of children.

Exact figures on the number of primary education community schools that have emerged since 2021 are unavailable due to security risks. Many of these schools are managed by CDM teachers, who sought community spaces and continue to teach using the existing national curriculum textbooks, mainly old copies or books downloaded from the internet. These schools are demand-driven, with parents opting out of government schools managed by the SAC. The authors visited one such school between December 2023 and January 2024

in the Sittaung River Valley in the eastern Bago Region. Previously a government-recognized school, it was closed at the beginning of the CDM movement. However, it reopened in 2023 under the authority of the Karen National Union (KNU), which had taken control of the area. It allows CDM teachers to reopen schools and to teach using the government curriculum (in the Burmese language) in non-Karen-speaking areas, although teaching the curriculum's contentious history syllabus, which conveys the Bamar majority's view of the past, is disallowed by the KNU.

New non-state higher or further education institutes have also emerged since 2021 to meet older students' needs. The largest is Spring University Myanmar, an open university platform established in May 2021 that now serves more than 17,000 students through virtual courses. Although its diplomas are not recognized domestically, Spring University Myanmar, like many non-state institutions since the coup, has affiliated with international universities, such as Payap University in Thailand and the University of Arizona in the United States, to ensure accreditation.[43] The Mon National College (discussed later) has similar partnerships.

The Karen Education and Culture Department's Bureau of Higher Education engages with 20 higher education institutions, 11 of which follow a standardized curriculum. The other nine operate independently with their own curricula and follow their own education policies and systems.[44] Similarly, the Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), the political wing of the KIA, has established several higher education institutions in areas of the country it controls. These include the Mai Ja Yangon National College, the Institute of Liberal Arts and Sciences and the Mai Ja Yang Institute of Education. In 2022, on the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Mon National Education Committee, the New Mon State Party—the political wing of the Mon National Liberation Army—established the Mon National College near its headquarters in Nyisar in southern Mon State. It offers a two-year, post-high school college programme and degree-level courses in seven subjects. Additionally, a dozen or more post-primary education colleges exist in Karen and Karenni refugee camps in Thailand or in Thai cities, such as Mae Sot, Mae Hong Son, Chiang Mai and Bangkok. For refugee children, these are often the only post-secondary education institutions available.

Most teachers in these institutions are female, and women play leading roles in many education departments, CSOs and training institutes, making tertiary education a critical domain of women's

agency. For decades, ethnic higher education institutions have taught vulnerable and marginalized students who would otherwise have had no opportunity to pursue higher education in Myanmar. Therefore, higher education institutions have been crucial for many marginalized ethnic communities in providing further education. However, higher education institutions in ethnic areas do not offer university degrees. No SAC-recognized university in Myanmar and only a few universities abroad (as noted) acknowledge the results of EAO-administered matriculation exams. In the past, international development partners rarely paid attention to higher education initiatives in ethnic areas since most donors focused on primary education. Therefore, funding for ethnic higher education institutions has long been scarce and unpredictable and further exacerbated by the coup.[45]

Expansion of Ethnic Education Providers

For decades, Myanmar's EAOs have demonstrated that they can provide government services, including education, in the areas under their control.[46] Since 2021, many have become the leading healthcare and education providers. The most established ethnic education departments include the KNU's Education and Culture Department, the New Mon State Party's Mon National Education Committee and the Education Department of the KIO. According to reports, in Mon State, the number of students in schools administered by the New Mon State Party Mon has increased by 1,500 since the coup. Many CDM teachers have relocated to work in these community schools.

The EAOs and their political outfits derive legitimacy for delivering education to their own ethnic groups. While the EAO's education departments typically operate in territories populated by communities of the ethnic nationality they represent, several groups, such as the KNU and KIO, have expanded into areas previously under the central government authority.[47] Indeed, since the coup, people not from the ethnic group have enrolled their children in EAO-run schools, preferring not to send their children to junta-administered schools. In some instances, this has resulted in greater understanding and sympathy from individuals from the larger ethnic groups, including Burmans, of the repression faced by the smaller ethnic groups.[48]

The teaching methodology adopted by the ethnic education systems, particularly those on the Thai border, is often perceived

as more progressive than that of the government schools, mainly due to their adoption of international teaching practices.[49] These schools, primarily operated by the KNU and the Karenni National Progressive Party, the political wing of the Karenni Army, formulated their education models in the 1970s and 1980s when many of the schools were in refugee camps. Unlike the teacher-centric rote learning common in Myanmar, they embraced globally established practices such as child-centered learning.[50] As unrecognized education providers, they have historically operated outside state-level regulations and mostly do not receive state support. An exception is the New Mon State Party's Mon National Education Committee, which had an agreement with the government and received textbooks before the 2021 coup. While international donors provide some funding, local communities predominately support these schools. Teachers often receive stipends, but they are essentially volunteers.

The main EAO education systems exemplify the relevance and viability of a bottom-up federating approach. Some EAOs and their political wings, such as the KNU, have delivered education for over 70 years. These well-established systems have had to adapt to fluctuating contexts and have become increasingly resilient, providing consistent learning opportunities despite challenges, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic.[51] Local communities play a vital role, often creating the schools and then seeking support from the EAOs, highlighting the authenticity and local relevance of this bottom-up approach. With a focus on mother-tongue learning, these EAO-run schools lay the foundation for an MTB-MLE approach in a future federal education system.

Operational Challenges

Following the launch of Operation 1027, a coordinated attack against the military by three EAOs in northern Myanmar in October 2023, the junta retaliated by specifically targeting schools and religious buildings. Consequently, education has become further politicized. Enrolment in non-state schools risks retribution from the military, but enrolment in SAC-endorsed schools exposes children to the military's propaganda and reprisals from the anti-junta opposition.

Families and communities are still recovering from the disruptions to education caused by the pandemic. According to a World Bank report, government schools in Myanmar were closed for 532 days between February 2020 and February 2022,[52] the longest closures in the East Asia and Pacific region.[53] This extensive loss of learning

opportunities severely disrupted education programmes already operating in challenging environments.

Another significant issue is the limited and insecure financing of many ethnic organizations. The EAOs' taxation and revenue systems prioritize defence and immediate humanitarian needs, leaving most schools to depend on donor funding and in-kind contributions from communities. Most EAO schools do not charge fees. But this means they are sometimes dependent on the agendas of their donors. While these can align with the education priorities, they can also compromise learning efficacy when they do not match local realities, forcing education systems to focus on securing financing.[54] Additionally, many previously government-administered schools have been taken over by the EAOs since 2021, increasing the demand for resources to pay teacher stipends and provide learning materials.[55]

Despite the ethnic education sector's strength in providing relevant and resilient learning opportunities, there is a legacy of exclusion and oversight. For example, a comprehensive World Bank report from 2023 on Myanmar's education system did not reference or account for ethnic education provisions.[56] For the bottom-up federating approach to succeed, these systems need greater acknowledgment, including by international organizations, and should be included in future discussions on research and funding.

Building Blocks of Federal Education

Building a federal education system with inclusive, localized education programmes is complex. Despite the chaos and challenges of the ongoing conflict, there are ample opportunities in post-coup Myanmar. At this stage, it is impossible to define precisely what a future federal democracy imagined by the NUG would look like. The remainder of this article discusses some of the "building blocks" that could make up a future federal education system.

Any federal education system in a multiethnic society must address the language of instruction. The MTB-MLE curriculum developed by some ethnic education providers could provide a strong foundation. MTB-MLE is critical in addressing the pedagogical needs of students and mitigating the political grievances stemming from decades of Burmanization in the classroom. The pedagogical approach is used across multilingual societies to promote inclusion and bottom-up peacebuilding, including in the Philippines, Nigeria[57] and Nepal.[58] However, implementing MTB-MLE is complex and

resource-intensive, especially given the 111 languages spoken in Myanmar.[59] Ethnic groups such as the Karenni and the Shan coexist with smaller minority communities, such as the Kayan, the Gabar, the Pa'O and the Lahu, complicating language status decisions. Unrecognized groups, like the Rohingya, are particularly vulnerable. Historically, only larger local ethnic groups were given the technical support to develop their own curricula, leaving the smaller ethnic groups further behind and forced to learn another language besides Burmese.[60] This raises questions regarding locally dominant ethnic group identities and interests of the "minorities within minorities".[61] Using existing MTB-MLE curricula and building on local legitimacy and technical expertise could be a core strategy for a new federal system. For instance, some ethnic education systems are developing materials for students who speak less dominant languages, such as Zaiwa in Kachin State.[62]

State-level coordination and consultation bodies are other fundamental building blocks for a future federal education system. Since the coup, new state-based political coordination and governance bodies have emerged, redefining resistance and self-determination in Myanmar. Mainly conceived in relation to geographic territories—not the narrowly defined ethnic communities mobilized by EAOs—these are potentially the most inclusive polities in the country's history. For example, State Consultative Councils have been established in Kachin, Mon, Karenni, Chin and Shan States, and in Tanintharyi, Irrawaddy and Sagaing Regions. People's Administrative Bodies play similar roles in Burman-majority districts where EAOs do not operate.[63] These state-based bodies, often constituent elements of the NUG, were formed by local political organizers and civil society. They remain under-researched and unevenly supported.

In Karenni State, the smallest state in Myanmar, the Karenni State Consultative Council established an Interim Executive Council in June 2023. Composed of different ethnic groups, EAOs and CSOs, it has assumed responsibilities as the interim state government, using a collective leadership model. Having already taken responsibility for delivering public services, the Interim Executive Council is exploring ways of creating a federal education system, including multi-stakeholder discussions around a common curriculum framework to support all ethnic groups in benefitting from an MTB-MLE approach.[64] In Chin State, education is delivered by decentralized, township-based "education boards" organized by "people's administrative teams", an NUG experiment in local governance in preparation for a federal democratic system.[65]

In a federal education system, tensions will exist between maintaining flexibility to ensure local relevance and maintaining common standards. A global common practice is to focus standards on competencies rather than content, allowing flexibility and reducing sensitivity.[66] Under the NLD education reforms in the 2010s, standards for curricula and teachers were developed but were content-focused and Burman-centric. Since 2021, many ethnic education providers have created their own curriculum and teacher competency standards. Finding common standards among these could allow for standardized accreditation without compromising local relevance. This could be a role for the NUG's Ministry of Education. One critical aspect would be assessing the standards in the matriculation exam without compromising its validity. The West African Senior School Certificate Examination, managed by a central accreditation body and comprising core subjects and localized electives, could serve as a model.[67]

Recognizing non-state students and teachers is another crucial building block. Before the 2021 coup, Myanmar's education system was divided between recognized and non-recognized providers. The central government did not officially recognize ethnic education systems, preventing many students from obtaining the certificates needed to attend government universities or colleges. Consequently, few students from ethnic minority groups could enroll and qualify as recognized teachers.[68] In a federal education system that reflects diverse linguistic needs, it is essential to diversify the ethnicity of recognized teachers. This will require reformulating education laws and restructuring both teacher qualification processes and student assessments.

Conclusions

Attempts to develop more localized education systems in Myanmar have faced significant challenges in recent decades. Moves to federalize education have been on hold since the 2021 coup, although the anti-junta NUG's federal education policy is a step towards decentralization. However, it largely fails to recognize or build on the roles and systems of ethnic education providers, the organizations that actually administer the schools. This oversight will likely constrain the relevance and implementation of the NUG's approach. Following the federal principle of subsidiarity, education should be a state-level undertaking with limited interference from central authorities, including the NUG.

In conflict-affected areas of the country, the primary difficulty in "federating" education is security, as the military is targeting civilians, including schools. Despite this, local communities, EAO education departments and civil society partners have begun to federate education from the bottom up. Ethnic education providers in Myanmar have developed networks that contribute to the emergence of higher-level alliances and strategies while lobbying and negotiating for realistic federal education policies that reflect the country's realities and needs.

The arguments in this article relate primarily to ethnic education systems. In lowland and Burman-populated areas, similar roles are played by People's Administration Bodies, which have taken responsibility for coordinating (and, in places, implementing) delivering services to communities in areas resisting the junta, often operating under the NUG. These subnational governance bodies may emerge as majority community counterparts of ethnic minority education providers in a future federal Myanmar. However, as long as the SAC remains in power, children in Myanmar will lack access to quality education.

Potential conflicts between EAOs and other stakeholders are foreseeable. As central authorities lose power, armed groups may compete to establish their own territories, impacting the delivery of services such as education.[69] Additionally, there could be challenges related to the treatment of smaller ethnic minorities by larger ones—the "minorities-within-minorities" concern[70]—and the potential for locally dominant EAOs to marginalize other ethnolinguistic and minority groups, particularly regarding language use in education.[71]

A coherent federal education system is still a long way off. In the short term, achieving this will be difficult due to the military's attacks on civilians and schools. However, as identified in this article, some key building blocks—such as the MTB-MLE curricula and state-level coordination and consultation bodies—are being established. Beyond physical safety, the most significant necessity is the accreditation of non-state education. This would allow students from ethnic schools to use their certificates to access higher education and jobs, thereby helping to build an inclusive workforce.

NOTES

1 Ashley South and Marie Lall, *Citizenship in Myanmar: Ways of Being in and from Burma* (Singapore: ISEAS – Yusof Ishak Institute, 2018).

[2] Few detailed studies of service delivery (educational or otherwise) in Myanmar have been conducted since the coup. The figure of one million children comes from the authors' conversations with ethnic basic education providers and education specialists conducted between 2022 and 2024. A well-placed interlocutor interviewed on 20 April 2024 estimated that there are around 8,000 "non-state schools" three years after the coup.

[3] South and Lall, *Citizenship in Myanmar*.

[4] Ashley South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change: Emergent Federal Systems in Post-Coup Myanmar (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development,* Chiang Mai University, 2023), https://rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th/publications/conflict-complexity-climate-change/.

[5] On the history and politics of federalism in Myanmar, see Alan Smith, "Burma/Myanmar: Struggle for Democracy and Ethnic Rights", in *Multiculturalism in Asia*, edited by Will Kymlicka and Baogang He (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005); Alan Smith, *Thinking about Federalism* (Yangon, Myanmar: Covenant Consult and Ethnic Peace Resources Project, 2019). Related but distinct concepts include "decentralization" and "regional autonomy". See Yash Ghai, *Autonomy and Ethnicity: Negotiating Competing Claims in Multi-ethnic States* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 8.

[6] South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change*.

[7] Sarah L. Clarke, Seng Aung Sein Myint, and Zabra Yu Siwa, *Re-examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar* (Siem Reap, Cambodia: Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies, 2019), https://www.centrepeaceconflictstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Re-Examining-Ethnic-Identity-in-Myanmar.pdf.

[8] Martin Smith, *Burma: Insurgency and the Politics of Ethnicity* (London, UK: Zed Books, 1999).

[9] Matthew J. Walton, "Ethnicity, Conflict, and History in Burma: The Myths of Panglong", *Asian Survey* 48, no. 6 (November–December 2008): 889–910.

[10] Clarke, Sein Myint, and Siwa, *Re-examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar*; Hans-Bernd Zöllner, "The War in the Minds: Some Reflections on the Thorny Peace Process in Myanmar", Covenant Institute, 2020, https://covenant-institute.com/wp-content/uploads/War-in-the-Minds_English_19Oct2023.pdf.

[11] Ibid.

[12] South and Lall, *Citizenship in Myanmar*; Ashley South and Marie Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 38, no. 1 (April 2016): 128–53.

[13] Hamish Nixon, Cindy Joelene, Kyi Pyar Chit Saw, Thet Aung Lynn, and Matthew Arnold, *State and Region Governments in Myanmar* (Yangon, Myanmar: Asia Foundation, 2013), https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Report_State_and_Region_Governments_in_Myanmar_CESD_and_TAF_Sept2013.PDF.

[14] The details seemingly differ between states and regions. For example, education falls under the Ministry of Social Affairs in Karenni (Kayah) State and under the Ministry of Social Welfare in Chin State.

[15] South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar"; Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Rosalie Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building:

The Evolution of History Curricula in Myanmar", *Journal of Burma Studies* 16, no. 1 (2012): 27–78.

16 Government of the Union of Myanmar, "National Education Law", Ch 6.34c, 2015, https://www.mlis.gov.mm/mLsView.do;jsessionid=01A33480229B18DAFA77B8F74220FC6F?lawordSn=9630.

17 Thein Lwin, *Education in Burma (1945–2000)* (Chiang Mai, Thailand: Thinking Classroom Foundation, 2000).

18 South and Lall, "Language, Education and the Peace Process in Myanmar", pp. 128–53; Mary Patricia Callahan, *Making Enemies: War and State Building in Burma* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2012).

19 "[S]tudents who spoke the assessment language at home tended to achieve significantly higher scores in all domains than students who spoke another language." United Nations Children's Fund and Southeast Asian Ministers of Education, "SEA-PLM 2019 Main Regional Report, Children's Learning in 6 Southeast Asian Countries", 2020, p. 44, https://www.unicef.org/eap/media/7356/file/SEAPLM%202019%20Main%20Regional%20Report.pdf.

20 UNESCO, "Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education: Lessons Learned from a Decade of Research and Practice", Asia Multilingual Education Working Group (Bangkok: UNESCO, 2014), https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000231865; UNESCO, "If You Don't Understand, How Can You Learn?" Policy Paper 24, Global Education Monitoring Report, 2016, https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000243713_eng.

21 Nicolas Salem-Gervais and Mael Raynaud, "Teaching Ethnic Minority Languages in Government Schools and Developing the Local Curriculum: Elements of Decentralization in Language-in-Education Policy", *Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung*, 2020, https://www.kas.de/en/web/myanmar/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/teaching-ethnic-minority-languages-in-government-schools-and-developing-the-local-curriculum; Salem-Gervais and Metro, "A Textbook Case of Nation-Building"; Makiko Takeda, "Language Policy, Ethnic Identity, and Majority-Minority Relations in Myanmar", in *Myanmar's Changing Political Landscape: Old and New Struggles*, edited by Makiko Takeda and Chosein Yamahata (Singapore: Springer, 2023).

22 Government of the Union of Myanmar, "Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan", 2018, https://themimu.info/sites/themimu.info/files/documents/Core_Doc_Myanmar_Sustainable_Development_Plan_2018_-_2030_Aug2018.pdf.

23 Government of the Union of Myanmar, "National Education Law", Ch 7.43b, 2015.

24 Kim Joliffe and Emily Speers Mears, "Strength in Diversity: Towards Universal Education in Myanmar's Ethnic Areas", *Policy Dialogue Brief Series* no. 14 (2016): 8.

25 Ashley South, "Towards 'Emergent Federalism' in Post-Coup Myanmar", *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 43, no. 3 (2021): 439–60.

26 Government of the Union of Myanmar, "National Education Law", Ch 7.39g, 2015.

27 South, "Towards 'Emergent Federalism'", pp. 439–60.

[28] Yaw Bawm Mangshang, "Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education: A Vehicle for Building Myanmar into an Equal and Fair Federal Democratic Union", in *Myanmar After the Coup: Resistance, Resilience, and Re-invention*, edited by Giuseppi Gabusi and Raimondo Neironi (Turin, Italy: Torino World Affairs Institute, 2022).

[29] Two other EAOs, including the New Mon State Party, signed the NCA in February 2018.

[30] Bogyoke Aung San, Burma's independence hero, was assassinated on the eve of independence on 19 July 1947.

[31] South, "Towards 'Emergent Federalism'", pp. 439–60.

[32] Ashley South, Marie Lall, Emily Stenning, Tim Schroeder, Aye Aye Tun, Nicola Edwards, Kim Jolliffe, Axel Schroeder, Vivian Lall, Mi Kun Chan Non, Aung Htun, Nangzing Lu Awn, and Cin Khan Lian, "Myanmar Education Partnership Project Policy Note", Covenant Consult, September 2020, unpublished manuscript.

[33] The authors were directly involved in this project and discussed the issues on numerous occasions with key participants between 2018 and 2020.

[34] Authors' interviews with stakeholders conducted between 2018 and 2020.

[35] Jacques Bertrand, "Education, Language, and Conflict in Myanmar's Ethnic Minority States", *Asian Politics and Policy* 14, no. 1 (January 2022): 25–42.

[36] Ashley South, Nicola Edwards, Tyler Davies, Cin Khan Lian, Rachel Diang Din, Mai Naomi Thang, and Emily Stenning, "Language and Education in Chin State", Working Paper no. 1, Covenant Consult, 2021, https://covenant-consult.com/2021/01/language-and-education-in-chin-state/.

[37] During the education reforms conducted between 2011 and 2021, several development partners played important and influential roles, including in technical advice and significant funding. For instance, the European Union provided around US$240 million. See "Launch of the European Union's First Budget Support Programme in Myanmar: EUR 221 Million to Support Education Reform", 22 March 2019, https://www.eeas.europa.eu/node/60752_en. Although the Myanmar government's budget was used for the education systems' operating costs, most of the reforms were dependent on donor support. A useful discussion on the influence and tensions of donors within the sector is found in Pyoe Pin, *Political Economy Analysis of Basic Education in Myanmar* (London, UK: British Council, 2014).

[38] Saurav Dev Bhatta, Saurav Katwal, Sutirtha Sinha Roy, Roy Van der Weide, Uttam Sharma, Aung Phyo Kyaw, and Mar Mar Thwin, *Education in Myanmar: Where Are We Now?* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2023), https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/716418bac40878ce262f57dfbd4eca05-0070012023/original/State-of-Education-in-Myanmar-July-2023.pdf.

[39] A report by an anonymous author contends that the highest volumes of participants came from the health and education sectors. See "The Centrality of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar's Post-Coup Era", Policy Briefing SEARBO, Australian National University, p. 2, https://www.newmandala.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/SEARBO_CDM-Myanmar_paper.pdf.

[40] Nicolas Salem-Gervais, Summer Aung, Amber Spreelung, Ja Seng, Jung Benatar and Chan, "Amendment of the National Education Law and Other Language-in-Education Developments following the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar (part 1)", Tea Circle blog, 8 May 2023, https://teacirclemyanmar.com/education/amendment-of-the-national-education-law-and-other-language-in-education-developments-following-the-2021-military-coup-in-myanmar-part-2/.

[41] As of 2023, nine NUCC joint coordination committees had been established, including an education committee. However, most ethnic education groups have only participated as observers.

[42] Authors' interview with representatives of the Karen National Union's Karen Education and Culture Department in Mae Sot, Thailand, on 30 April 2024.

[43] For instance, the Spring University Myanmar collaborates with the University of Arizona, Arizona State University and Victoria University of Wellington.

[44] Karen Education and Culture Department, "What We Do", https://kecdktl.org/what-we-do/. For more in-depth analysis of the Karen Education and Culture Department and Karen education since independence, see Hayso Thako and Tony Waters, "Schooling, Identity, and Nationhood: Karen Mother-Tongue-Based Education in the Thai-Burmese Border Region", *Social Sciences* 12, no. 3 (2023): 9–13.

[45] As of mid-September 2023, the Karen Education and Culture Department had recorded 19 airstrikes and/or artillery attacks on Karen schools since the coup.

[46] Previous research, including some conducted by the authors, indicates that the governance and administration of EAOs in Myanmar is a fairly unique phenomenon globally. See Ashley South, Tim Schroeder, Kim Jolliffe, Mi Kun Chan Non, Saw Sa Shine, Susanne Kempel, Axel Schroeder, and Naw Wah Shee Mu, "Between Ceasefires and Federalism: Exploring Interim Arrangements in the Myanmar Peace Process", Myanmar Interim Arrangements Research Project, Covenant Consult, 2018, https://covenant-consult.com/2018/11/between-ceasefires-and-federalism-exploring-interim-arrangements-in-the-myanmar-peace-process/; Ashley South, "'Hybrid Governance' and the Politics of Legitimacy in the Myanmar Peace Process", *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 48, no. 1 (2017): 50–66.

[47] South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change*.

[48] Richard Horsey, "Myanmar on the Brink of State Failure", International Crisis Group, 9 April 2021, https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/myanmar-brink-state-failure.

[49] Thako and Waters, "Schooling, Identity, and Nationhood".

[50] Ibid., p. 9.

[51] Authors' interview with representatives of the Karen Education and Culture Department in Mae Sot, Thailand, on 30 April 2024; authors' interview with a Karen National Union Central Committee member in Chiang Mai, Thailand, on 8 May 2024.

[52] Bhatta, Katwal, Roy, Van der Weide, Sharma, Kyaw and Thwin, *Education in Myanmar: Where Are We Now?*

[53] Sutirtha Sinha Roy, Roy Van der Weide, Saurav Dev Bhatta, and Mar Mar Thwin, "A Generation of Children Are at Risk of Learning Losses in Myanmar", World Bank, 24 October 2023, https://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/generation-children-are-risk-learning-losses-myanmar.

[54] Authors' interview with representatives of the Karen Education and Culture Department in Mae Sot, Thailand, on 30 April 2024; and authors' interview with representatives of the Mon National Education Committee, conducted online, on 23 May 2024.

[55] South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change.*

[56] Bhatta, Katwal, Roy, Van der Weide, Sharma, Kyaw and Thwin, *Education in Myanmar: Where Are We Now?*

[57] Sadiq Habiba Alhaji, Ocheido Syvanus, Meseko Samuel Adekunle, Olofinniyi Olaiya Emmanuel, Agada Eleche John, and Ochai John, "Analysis of West African Examination Council and National Examination Council Performance of Senior Secondary School Students Opting Universities Admission in North Central Nigeria", *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention* 9, no. 1 (December 2020): 49–55.

[58] Indra Mani Rai, "Multilingual Education in Nepal: Policies and Practices", *Siksa Biannual Educational Journal* 2, no. 47 (2018): 131–43.

[59] Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, "Teaching Ethnic Minority Languages in Government Schools".

[60] South, Edwards, Davies, Lian, Din, Thang, and Stenning, "Language and Education in Chin State".

[61] Marie Lall, "The Value of Bama-Saga: Minorities within Minorities' Views in Shan and Rakhine States", https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10120050/1/The%20Value%20of%20Bama-saga.pdf.

[62] Authors' conversations with an ethnic education provider in Kachin State, which is supporting textbooks up until Grade 4. This is a relatively recent development.

[63] South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change.*

[64] Authors' research into the progress being made by the Interim Executive Council in Karenni areas.

[65] "Chin Communities Establish Local Administrations across the State", *Democratic Voice of Burma*, 6 December 2023, https://english.dvb.no/chin-communities-establish-local-administrations/.

[66] Sinéad Fitzsimons, Victoria Coleman, Jackie Greatorex, Hiba Salem, and Martin Johnson, "Context Matters: Adaptation Guidance for Developing a Local Curriculum from an International Curriculum Framework", *Research Matters*, a Cambridge Assessment publication, 2020, https://www.cambridgeassessment.org.uk/Images/598389-context-matters-adaptation-guidance-for-developing-a-local-curriculum-from-an-international-curriculum-framework.pdf.

[67] Alhaji, Syvanus, Adekunle, Emmanuel, John, and John, "Analysis of West African Examination Council".

[68] Salem-Gervais and Raynaud, "Teaching Ethnic Minority Languages in Government Schools".

[69] For example, several EAOs in northern Shan State have tried to develop their own administrations in areas where territory is contested.

[70] South and Lall, *Citizenship in Myanmar*; Clarke, Myint, and Siwa, *Re-examining Ethnic Identity in Myanmar*.

[71] South, *Conflict, Complexity and Climate Change.*