


RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Can regime change improve ethnic relations? Perception of ethnic minorities after the 2021 coup in Myanmar

Roman David<sup>1\*</sup> , Aung Kaung Myat<sup>2</sup> and Ian Holliday<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Lingnan University, Tuen Mun, Hong Kong and <sup>2</sup>The University of Hong Kong, Pok Fu Lam, Hong Kong

\*Corresponding author. E-mail: [rdavid@LN.edu.hk](mailto:rdavid@LN.edu.hk)

(Received 20 July 2021; revised 16 November 2021; accepted 18 January 2022; first published online 16 May 2022)

## Abstract

Regime change often exacerbates ethnic conflict. This article examines the curious case of Myanmar, where a 2021 military coup was met, on the surface, with broad-based resistance across a divided society. An important question that therefore arises is whether, below the surface, this unity also took a more positive form of national solidarity. Were deep ethnic cleavages intensified or alleviated by the 2021 coup? This question bears theoretical relevance for the study of ethnic conflict and has social relevance for a nation marked by a long history of civil war and a recent experience of genocide against Rohingya Muslims. The article engages in a systematic examination of 180 social media posts uploaded in Burmese by key opinion leaders both before and after the coup. A qualitative analysis of major positive and negative themes indicates a shift in attitudes. The quantitative analysis shows that ethnic relations, measured by a change in themes, ratings and virality, improved significantly in the immediate aftermath of Myanmar's 2021 coup.

**Key words:** Ethnic minorities; ethnic relations; Facebook; military coup; Myanmar; nationalism; Rohingya; social media

## 1. Introduction

On 1 February 2021, a coup d'état halted a decade-long incremental transition away from overt military rule in Myanmar and reinstated repressive control by the national armed forces.<sup>1</sup> Led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, the State Administration Council (SAC) that took office was quickly met with a peaceful mass street protest and a civil disobedience movement (CDM) loosely supported by a cohort of elected national legislators brought together in a Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH). Throughout the country, with the single notable exception of Rakhine state on the western border with Bangladesh, citizens rose up in revolt. Indeed, for perhaps the first time since independence from British colonial rule in 1948, individuals from almost the entire nation appeared to be politically united. Even when the death toll from brutal regime reprisals prompted resistance to turn violent, popular support remained solid for the National Unity Government (NUG) formed as an extension of the CRPH to lead the struggle.

On the surface, this unity took the negative form of blanket resistance to the coup. An important question that therefore arises is whether, below the surface, it also took a more positive form of national solidarity fomented by mass rejection of the military power grab. Were deep cleavages present in Myanmar society for decades and even centuries fundamentally reshaped by the political shock of

<sup>1</sup>Place names remain somewhat controversial in Myanmar. In this article, we use vocabulary codified by British colonial administrators (Burma, Rangoon, Irrawaddy and so on) for the period before 1989, and terminology promulgated by military rulers (Myanmar, Yangon, Ayeyarwady and so on) for the period after 1989. Throughout, we use 'Burmese' for the dominant language. No political statement is intended.

the 2021 coup? In particular, were ethnic schisms, often identified in Myanmar as racial, recast by the sense of outrage experienced by citizens in virtually every corner of the land? In a country marked by a long history of ethnic conflict, civil war and, more recently, genocide against Rohingya Muslims, this is a critical issue. It is underscored by broader theoretical interest in changing dynamics of ethnic conflict. Does regime change in a multi-ethnic society necessarily trigger exacerbation of ethnic relations? Is Myanmar a notable case where violent regime change actually improved relations between the majority and diverse minorities?

To answer this question, this article undertakes systematic qualitative and quantitative examination of Facebook posts uploaded in Burmese by key opinion leaders both before and after the coup. It has six core sections. The first reviews theoretical analysis and historical cases of regime change and effects on ethnic relations. The following two sections are situated at the macro-level within Myanmar. The second examines ethnic relations in historical and transitional context, and the third looks at the 2021 coup. After that, we report our empirical investigation. The fourth section describes our methodology, the fifth presents our qualitative analysis of major themes in Facebook posts about ethnic relations before and after the 2021 coup and the sixth sets out our quantitative analysis. A brief conclusion argues that in the immediate aftermath of Myanmar's 2021 coup ethnic relations improved significantly and points to social dynamics underlying this change. Further analysis will be required to determine whether the impact is lasting.

## 2. Does regime change exacerbate ethnic conflict?

Does regime change affect ethnic relations and ethnic conflict? This is a complex matter, not least because many forms of regime change can be envisaged. At a broad level, some of the most searing episodes in recent world history have had a major impact on racial, ethnic and religious relations. In the 1930s, the demise of the Weimar Republic and the rise of the Third Reich saw Germany move from democratic to undemocratic, provoking a cataclysmic decline in communal relations (Evans, 2005). In the 1940s, the end of British colonial rule in India, and indeed Burma, saw newly sovereign states shift from undemocratic to democratic and at the same time descend into religious and ethnic conflict and civil war (Khan, 2008; Thant Myint-U, 2020). In the 1990s, the collapse of communism and the subsequent disintegration of Yugoslavia, another move from undemocratic to democratic, precipitated warfare and ethnic cleansing (Pavković, 2000). Concurrently, South Africa switched from apartheid to majority rule, again from undemocratic to democratic, and saw communal tension rise alarmingly (Clark and Worger, 2016). In the 2000s, the US invasion of Iraq was proclaimed as a liberation from tyranny, and for a while took the country from undemocratic to democratic, but also instigated devastating sectarian division (Cockburn, 2006). In each of these cases, regime change increased communal tension and exacerbated social conflict.

Focusing more strictly on ethnic relations, similar conclusions are reached by scholars. A fundamental division exists between primordialists, who ascribe violent ethnic conflict to deep-rooted aspects of identity, and instrumentalists, who perceive ethnic relations in principally rational terms (Kataria, 2018). Against this backdrop, analysts seek to explain the growing intensity of political violence linked to ethnicity since the 1970s (Harff and Gurr, 2004). In 2004, Osaghae argued that in Africa political transition is so commonly associated with ethnic conflict that it should be given greater prominence in the literature: 'politicized ethnicity has been a critical factor in the search for stable democracies in Africa and, as such, should be mainstreamed in transition studies' (Osaghae, 2004: 222). Equally, scholars have sought to determine whether regime change always exacerbates ethnic conflict. In 2001, Mousseau used a pooled time-series sample of 126 nations from 1948 to 1982 to probe this issue. She concluded that democratization in multi-ethnic societies does generate more intense forms of political violence. However, she also held that 'ethnic violence is not a function of inexplicable and fixed primordial elements, but rather a function of explainable environmental conditions', notably levels of political and economic development (Mousseau, 2001: 564). In 1993, drawing on East-Central European experience, de Nevers sought to identify the conditions in which

democratization is likely either to temper or to deepen ethnic tension. Her conclusion was that ‘whether democratization is likely to allay ethnic tension or not depends on the circumstances that exist when the process of democratization takes place, as well as the early and careful attention given to ethnic issues by political leaders’ (De Nevers, 1993: 46). On the positive side she cited the single case of Malaysia, where an initial system of ethnic power distribution established a moderate political climate. However, Malaysia has never been more than partially democratic and any democratization process has always been ‘strong-state’ (Horowitz, 1993; Slater, 2012).

In the literature, then, there is abundant evidence that regime change can worsen ethnic relations and little or no countervailing proof that it can enhance them. In this context, we examine the case of Myanmar, where initial observation suggests that, paradoxically, ethnic relations advanced following regime change. This appears to be because of the nature of Myanmar’s 2021 coup, which in two respects was distinctive. First, although coups typically enable one major group to suppress another and thereby magnify social cleavages, in Myanmar a split within the Bamar majority generated a realignment across ethnic faultlines. Second, and again unusually, coup leaders in the military did not seek popular support. This motivates us to formulate a counter-intuitive hypothesis: Myanmar’s 2021 coup triggered an improvement in horizontal ethnic relations.<sup>2</sup>

### 3. Nationalism and ethnic relations in historical and transitional context in Myanmar

To understand whether Myanmar’s 2021 military coup reconfigured ethnic relations, we need to examine the preceding situation. The modern history of Myanmar contains four major phases, each of which shaped ethnic relations in the 200 years prior to the coup. In this section, we look briefly at colonial rule from the 1820s to the 1940s, nation-building from 1948 to 1962, military rule from 1962 to 2011 and the political transition in the 2010s.

In common with most of what is now southeast Asia, Burma’s ethnic relations were shaped by imperial incursion and control in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. British intervention, launched by the East India Company in 1824 and completed by the British Crown in 1886, imposed new frontiers on the territory. It opened up Burma to both global markets and extensive inward migration above all from other parts of the British Raj. From start to finish, it provoked resistance, both active and passive. In all these ways, it gave concrete, exclusionary, modern form to identities that had long seemed more fluid, inclusive and traditional (Thant Myint-U, 2001; Scott, 2009; Cho, 2018).

At independence in 1948, democratic Burma faced many challenges, notably ethnic division, tension and conflict. Facing off against a dominant Burman nationalism was a set of minority ethnic nationalisms generated by distinct experiences of colonialism, warfare and resistance and diverse aspirations for the future. In March 1962, ethnic insurgency triggered a military coup led by Chief of Staff General Ne Win (Badgley and Holliday, 2018). A new Revolutionary Council (RC) underpinned by state socialist ideology sought to impose military solutions on restive ethnic areas and launch a nation-building project. Cheesman recounts that Ne Win first emphasized the concept of national race (*taiyingtha*) in a February 1964 Union Day address, aiming both to exclude aliens and to promote national identity (Cheesman, 2017: 465–467). A template of eight ‘major’ and ultimately 135 ‘minor’ national races was devised.<sup>3</sup> Alongside the Bamar, the other seven major races took acknowledged places in the nation as official ethnic minorities. In the junta years of the 1990s and 2000s, ethnic relations remained bad though reasonably stable. David and Holliday argue that by the end of the 2000s there were three components to social exclusion: discriminatory legal provision and policy implementation; accumulated consequences of discrimination and selective tolerance (David and Holliday, 2018: 33).

Within this hierarchy of ethnic identity, one group was notably disadvantaged. This is the people now self-identifying as Rohingya Muslim, and often known in Myanmar as ‘Bengali’. In the Second

<sup>2</sup>‘Horizontal’ ethnic relations are understood here as relations between the ethnic majority and ethnic minorities that do not involve state actors.

<sup>3</sup>The eight major national races are the Bamar, Chin, Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, Mon, Rakhine and Shan.

World War, districts in Arakan bordering India were controlled by Muslim insurgents and not brought back under central authority until the 1950s. Although the RC was officially non-sectarian, and denied Buddhism the role of state religion accorded to it in the early 1960s, it bestowed considerable practical privileges on adherents. Its xenophobic nationalism also saw many people of South Asian heritage driven from Burma in the 1960s. Pogroms in 1978 and 1991, designed to push Muslims living in northern Rakhine state into neighbouring Bangladesh, intensified mass rejection of people widely perceived as ‘other’ (Wade, 2019).

Examining ethnic relations in 2008, Walton argued that Bamar identity had long operated much as whiteness functions in western societies, generating an assumed and unconscious superiority complex, and enabling bearers to think they fully constitute the nation (Walton, 2008). The Citizenship Act 1982 made membership of a national race the primary qualification for citizens (Cheesman, 2017). In 1988, the national army used national unity and solidarity to justify suppression of the mass democracy movement and creation of the State Law and Order Restoration Council. In the 1990s and 2000s, the successor State Peace and Development Council placed ever more emphasis on Bamar as the core national identity. For Walton, ‘unity through hegemony’ decisively superseded the ‘unity through diversity’ espoused by independence leader Aung San (Walton, 2015: 2).

In the 2010s, Myanmar embarked on a transition away from rigid military rule. ‘Discipline-flourishing democracy’, entrenched in the 2008 Constitution, created a power-sharing arrangement in which core military interests were protected through provisions for military ministers in security domains, military participation in legislative assemblies, military veto of constitutional change and ongoing military presence in the political life of the nation. The military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) won the 2010 general election and President Thein Sein led a USDP administration from 2011 to 2016. The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) won the 2015 general election, and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi effectively led an NLD administration from 2016 to 2021. Political reform advanced throughout the decade.

For official ethnic minorities, progress took place alongside regression. In peripheral areas, political stability enabled life to return to something approaching normalcy following decades of violence, insecurity and precarity. Still, this was not always the case, though, as civil conflict flared in much of Kachin state in the first half of the 2010s and then also in northern Shan state in the second half. In 2012, sectarian tension in Rakhine state exploded into violence that within days drove more than 100,000 mostly Rohingya Muslims into camps for internally displaced persons (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In the next couple of years, anti-Muslim violence spread to most other parts of Myanmar. Anti-Muslim sentiment was promoted particularly by a cohort of nativist monks and became central to the landscape of civic action. In 2016, military forces drove Rohingya communities into Bangladesh, as had happened in the late 1970s and early 1990s. For the Rohingya, the greatest calamity came in 2017, when a genocidal campaign of violence and exclusion, fomented by the national army and joined by mobs of Rakhine Buddhists, terrorized and tortured Rohingya populations, razed villages and drove hundreds of thousands of individuals into Bangladesh (Human Rights Council, 2018; Wade, 2019). By year end, the total refugee count was more than 1 million people.

In the remainder of the 2010s, little was done to repair the damage caused by anti-Muslim violence. Almost no repatriation took place, only limited interfaith dialogue was held nationally or within affected communities, and no attempt was made to bring perpetrators to justice. Indeed, in 2019 Aung San Suu Kyi, still effective leader of the NLD government, travelled to The Hague to contest charges of genocide levelled against Myanmar at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Conceding that intercommunal violence had taken place, that action against insurgents or terrorists had been necessary, that disproportionate force may have been used, she steadfastly repudiated the genocide charge, holding that there had been no orchestrated campaign of persecution (Simons and Beech, 2019).

In the early 2020s, Myanmar retained deep ethnic and religious cleavages. In 2014, towards the end of the Thein Sein period, and in 2017, shortly after the worst of the Rohingya crisis, David and

Holliday undertook surveys in the Bamar heartland and selected minority areas. These revealed three main orbits around the core social identity of Bamar Buddhist: members of official ethnic minorities were seen as close to the core identity, Christians, Hindus, Chinese and Indians were viewed as much more distant and Muslims, Bangladeshi and Rohingya were perceived as alien (David and Holliday, 2018: 112–120).

#### 4. The 2021 coup d'état in Myanmar

Political reform in Myanmar was brought to a halt by the February 2021 coup, which took place at the end of what should have been the transition's third institutional set-piece: the holding of a general election in November 2020 and the convening of a new parliament on what turned out to be the day of the coup. The election returned the NLD to power with an increased parliamentary majority and set the stage for Aung San Suu Kyi effectively to lead another administration as state counsellor. Both the Myanmar people and international observers viewed the election as largely free and fair. However, USDP and allied party leaders, who had suffered a damaging defeat, launched a growing drumbeat of criticism, insisting that millions of votes were fraudulent (Diamond and May Thingyan, 2020). In parallel, military elites started to question voter lists, provoking a clash with the NLD (San Yamin Aung, 2020). When government leaders declined to take seriously their patently absurd claims, Min Aung Hlaing led a military coup. Top NLD politicians were seized in the early hours of 1 February and other key political figures were taken soon thereafter. The SAC was created at the apex of a set of councils stretching down to townships and village tracts. A state of emergency was declared.

Resistance to the coup materialized within days, as people spontaneously took to the streets of cities and towns to protest, a CDM led initially by healthcare workers spread across the public sector, and the CRPH was formed. Mass protest was peaceful, even carnival-like, and mostly tolerated for the first 3 weeks, but turned violent when the national army sought to suppress a general strike called for 22 February. As the death toll mounted into the hundreds, mass protest became lethal and was replaced by guerrilla action designed to harass the SAC and its acolytes and keep protest alive through social media. Armed resistance increased in peripheral areas long tainted by civil war and targeted grassroots killings of SAC administrators and loyalists began to take place. The CDM, which paralysed most of the public sector beyond the ranks of the national army and quickly spawned a serious banking crisis, remained potent, though inevitably some officials started to return to work as economic pressure within families became severe. The NUG was formed to coordinate resistance led by a People's Defence Force (PDF) created on 5 May. On 7 September 2021, the NUG declared a defensive war against the military junta, calling on PDF units and ordinary citizens to rise up in revolt.

#### 5. Methodology

Our research combines qualitative and quantitative analysis of Facebook posts before and after Myanmar's 2021 coup d'état. We use Facebook because for the past decade it has been the country's dominant social media platform, with nearly 29 million users (52 per cent of the population) in January 2021 (NapoleonCat, 2021). Online content has also had real-life impacts (Ridout *et al.*, 2019). In 2018, a UN report unearthed on Facebook well-designed hate campaigns against Myanmar's ethnic minorities (Human Rights Council, 2018). Once the 2021 coup had taken place, Facebook played a critical role in keeping people informed of recent developments, rallying opposition and denouncing military leaders. Recognizing this, the SAC started to control the internet, placing ever greater limits on access by day and, especially, by night.

We downloaded our data through CrowdTangle, a Meta-owned analytical tool enabling interaction through public content on Facebook to be gathered (CrowdTangle, 2021). Four keywords – Rohingya, Bengali, ethnic armed organization (EAO), national race – were used to collect Burmese-language content posted on public pages. In total, we analysed 180 posts: 90 top Facebook posts from before the coup, and another 90 top Facebook posts from after the coup.

Our four keywords were central to Myanmar political discourse before and after the coup.<sup>4</sup> As mentioned above, Rohingya and Bengali refer to the same group of people mostly living in Rakhine state and believing in Islam. Use of one term vs the other is a marker for attitudes towards this ethnic group (Rahman, 2019). For this reason we include both terms, but instead of examining 30 posts for each category, as with the other two keywords, we look at only 15 for each. The Rohingya genocide and ongoing ICJ lawsuit are crucial to understanding contemporary political movements such as Buddhist nationalism and anti-coup activism. National race is another politically salient term. Roughly translated as ‘indigenous’, its connotation has changed since the colonial period (Cheesman, 2017). EAO is significant because of ongoing armed conflict in Myanmar. It contains the Burmese for national race, since EAO refers to armed groups with varying demands for self-autonomy for ethnic minorities. Unlike our other keywords, though, it is a politically neutral term used by military leaders, the NLD, media outlets and the general public. After the coup, some EAOs, notably the Karen National Union and the Kachin Independence Army, offered shelter and assistance to striking government workers, elected leaders and critics of the SAC from core, Bamar-dominated areas.

We used our four keywords to search content posted within two separate periods: 1 April 2016–31 January 2021 and 1 February–13 May 2021. Most of the data were downloaded on 13 May 2021, more than 100 days after the coup. The rest were downloaded on 24 May 2021. Viral posts deleted before 13 May 2021 are thus not included in our study. To capture sentiment about ethnic relations, we focused exclusively on media outlets’ news articles reporting statements or comments from public figures. Although news articles often go viral in Myanmar, it is hard to judge public reaction to them because of their objective stance. Moreover, outlets such as the BBC assemble lists of major headlines, making it impossible to judge what people are responding to. We therefore focused on opinion pieces, insight pieces, political statements and blog posts. While most were text-based, some also contained multimedia content. We sorted the posts by interactions, comprising Facebook reactions, shares and comments.

Our research only covers a segment of political discourse in Myanmar. In order not to endanger individuals living under a repressive regime, we excluded from our dataset content created by private Facebook accounts. We also excluded Facebook groups because the data mainly derive from private Facebook accounts with no explicit consent given to us. We thus focus on data generated by domestic and foreign media, celebrities, politicians and political parties, advocacy groups and bloggers. Our sources are mostly elite. However, for posts to go viral thousands of average Burmese citizens must engage with them through likes, comments and shares. In this way, our dataset identifies perspectives endorsed by ordinary people in a time when most forms of data collection were ruled out by political repression and violence.

## 6. Major themes in Facebook posts

In the qualitative analysis reported in this section, we describe the major themes found in Facebook posts for each of our four groups before and after the 2021 coup. In brackets after each cited post we use simple abbreviations: R for Rohingya, B for Bengali, E for EAOs, N for national race; B for the period before the coup, C for the period after the coup. We also insert a number to order posts within each period.

### 6.1 Rohingya before the coup

Before the coup, the vast majority of social media posts containing the ‘R-word’ came from western media. Their themes revolved around human rights, democracy and the ICJ. By contrast, parallel local

<sup>4</sup>In Burmese, the keywords we used were: (Rohingya), (Bengali), (ethnic armed organization) and (national race). The Burmese equivalent for EAO is *taiyingtha laat-naat-kine a-phwae*. We used *taiyingtha* (indigenous) *laat-naat-kine* (armed) to streamline our results.



posts spoke of Bengali. These latter posts are examined below. Occasionally, however, voices from inside the country suggested that Aung San Suu Kyi, Win Myint and the NLD government were complicit in the Rohingya genocide (RB9). Other local posts expressed moderate positions, proposing a compromise in repatriating the Rohingya and granting them citizenship, while at the same time denying them national race status (RB11). There was also some concern about the 2020 general election, predicted not to be free and fair due to disenfranchisement of the Rohingya (RB5). In hindsight, these could be used to justify the military power grab, or at least to support the military narrative of rigged elections.

Far more common were negative views of the Rohingya, and by extension of the UN and the international system, widely seen as promoting the Rohingya cause against the interests of Myanmar people (RB3). Aung San Suu Kyi warned that imposing global justice on Myanmar would ‘cut the limbs’ of the system of military justice, which is ‘important in helping the Tatmadaw (national armed forces) to correct and work according to the constitution’ (RB1).<sup>5</sup> An Indian movie about the Rohingya was considered scandalous even before it was shown (RB8). Something of a paradox would open up here, since after the coup many local people turned to the UN and the ICJ to save Myanmar from the national army and bring coup leaders to justice.

## 6.2 Rohingya after the coup

Following the coup, the NLD’s official position on the Rohingya switched with the detention of party leaders and the high profile assumed by Dr. Sasa, CRPH Special Envoy to the UN. Expressions of apology, appeals for justice and calls to Rohingya brothers and sisters derived from the realization that people throughout the country were all victims of the military, and that the dark shadow of military killings of unarmed civilians hung equally over everyone (RC1). Writing in both Burmese and English, Dr. Sasa said: ‘We will not rest until justice is being delivered to our dear Rohingya brothers and sisters who have suffered so much and for so long under this same military Generals who are now killing unarmed civilians across the streets, villages, towns and cities in Myanmar’. His words look beyond a shared plight to other misfortunes, such as a devastating fire at a Rohingya refugee camp at Cox’s Bazar, thereby seeking to build solidarity across ethnic faultlines (RC2).

Some NUG officials calling for an apology to the Rohingya and criticism of the human rights record of the NLD government, such as Naw Susanna Hla Hla Soe, NUG minister (RC3) and Ei Thinzar Maung (RC4), remained consistent on these issues. Others changed their position and apologized for not speaking up earlier for the Rohingya. Referring to the Rohingya and other ethnic minorities, one writer posted a public apology:

I have never stood up for them. I feel ashamed for that. Knowing is not enough. I should have spoken out for them...I don’t expect to be forgiven but I apologize to our national race brothers and sisters, and Rohingya. After we overcome this hell, let us stand up for others even when it does not affect us (RC6).

Such discourse reveals growing recognition of the suffering of the Rohingya. Still, however, they were not brought within the conceptual framework of national race, suggesting that their place in Myanmar society should not approach that of the official ethnic minorities. In addition, there were calls for (young) people to support each other, citing oppression in Thailand and Hong Kong and of the Rohingya. In posts like this there was a growing awareness of military abuse and of the need for cross-border online solidarity movements, such as the Milk Tea Alliance (Economist, 2021).

People also gave thanks to the Rohingya when their support for the anti-coup movement gained publicity (RC10). Sometimes a change in attitudes came through fresh perceptions of the national army (RC11). These derived from the realization that military forces (dehumanized as dogs by

<sup>5</sup>Organicist views of the state, originating with Aristotle, were among the sources of Nazism.

RC12) were killing indiscriminately (RC12 and RC15). The notion of ‘Rohingya genocide’ replaced the official narrative of ‘anti-terrorist operations’ and tarnished the army’s reputation, rather than enhancing it (RC14). Sometimes there was simple celebration of new public awareness of the Rohingya (RC13).

Finally, a military proposal to switch from a majoritarian electoral system to a form of proportional representation was justified as a mechanism to protect minorities, though some felt it was highly unlikely to happen (RC8).<sup>6</sup>

### 6.3 Bengali before the coup

It has long been controversial to use the term ‘Rohingya’ instead of ‘Bengali’ in Myanmar. Even under the NLD government, officials objected to the use of the term. Yangon Chief Minister Phyo Min Thein, subject to a nationalist backlash for speaking of the Rohingya, was warned by the NLD, his own party, to refrain from doing so again. In June 2018, Radio Free Asia, an American broadcaster supplying news to Asian countries, was banned by the Myanmar government from providing content to local partner DVB because it refused to stop using the term (Voice of America, 2018). Notwithstanding local protest, foreign media groups with a large Facebook following have spoken of the Rohingya for years. Their use of the term skews our data.

Before the coup, Rohingya were portrayed as Bengali intruders who were hiding, needed to be sought out and have action taken against them (BB1). One post from a blogger with thousands of interactions warned his followers that they were penetrating into urban areas, and called for the reintroduction of draconian measures to stop the migration flow. He argued:

They can hide in houses because the overnight guest registration system was abolished. It’s time to renew the overnight guest registration system and close the loopholes. Searches should be conducted in Yangon and other urban areas based on clues from this incident. Please find everyone involved and take effective action against them (BB1).<sup>7</sup>

Rohingya, repudiated as Bengali, were described as ‘foreign different-race invaders’ (BB4). Claims of genocide or ethnic cleansing were routinely rejected, and in line with government policy cast as ‘anti-terrorist operations’ (BB11) or simply the ‘Bengali refugee issue’ (BB5). Moreover, the core problem was said not to be the issue itself, but rather criticism of it and organizations helping the Rohingya (BB5). Aung San Suu Kyi was seen as the only person capable of providing a solution (BB5). A case was made that people should vote for the NLD because the military was too weak on the Rohingya, even allowing them to be elected to parliament, and was unable to uphold anti-Muslim laws (BB13).

In the global context, the Rohingya issue was used as an argument in support of President Trump. Trump was said to be a force for good in international relations because he was anti-China, anti-ICJ (mistakenly conflated with the International Criminal Court) and ‘pretended’ not to know anything about the Rohingya (BB6). The West was said to be using the Rohingya issue to side with Bangladesh against China (BB14).<sup>8</sup>

There was also rich debate about territory and ethnicity (BB12), focused on the notion of original inhabitants. This is dangerous because such ‘originalism’ can provide a historical-territorial cause for nationalism and justify ethnic cleansing. ‘Historical’ debates referring to famous kings, inscriptions, battles, glories and original residents have been prominent in other contexts. Before ethnic cleansing began in Yugoslavia 600 years later, a 1389 battle in a Kosovo field was invoked.

<sup>6</sup>Comparative analysis shows that proportional representation is good not only for minorities, but also for former elites. It is surprising that it was not written into the 2008 Constitution. Most post-communist countries and also South Africa implemented such a system. It was a strategic mistake by the military not to do so.

<sup>7</sup>Before the transition in the 2010s, the overnight guest registration system was used to locate government critics and harass activists. The NLD administration scrapped the law. After the coup, the SAC reinstated it.

<sup>8</sup>Myanmar conspiracy theories do not always make logical sense.



#### 6.4 Bengali after the coup

After the coup, perceptions changed in some posts, though by no means all. Notably, they appear not to have changed in NLD leadership circles. While key figures were held in detention and unable to communicate with the wider society, some others joined the NUG. Most NLD members of the NUG issued no public apology to the Rohingya, even though pressure mounted in civil society for them to do so. When views did change, there tended to be accompanying appeals to abstract principles of justice and human rights. This was vividly illustrated by a powerful statement showing a shift from actors to abstraction, moving beyond the view of the military as a common enemy to both Bamar and Rohingya, and instead seeing racial supremacy and fascism as the problem, converging on a perspective of equality and justice (BC2). Similarly, others argued that inclusiveness, fairness and other such values should prevail (BC4). Appeals were also made for truth to emerge as a Buddhist virtue in tackling Nazism, fascism and racism in Myanmar (BC12).

One of the major obstacles for a greater identity shift and embrace of the Rohingya was military relations with Bangladesh. In May 2021, SAC leader Min Aung Hlaing reaffirmed the military view that the Rohingya are not an official ethnic group and will not be allowed to return to their homes in Rakhine state (Radio Free Asia, 2021). His aim was probably to bolster domestic legitimacy, anticipating perhaps that taking the position of ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend’ would win local allies.

For some Myanmar people, though, the prime enemy became the national army and, by extension, the Rohingya became friends. Yet for others, the ‘enemy of my enemy’ logic did not work. Rather, these people sought to discredit the military still further by arguing that it wanted to bring back the Rohingya (BC3, BC5 and BC10). One post criticized the military and the USDP, its political wing, for not prioritizing the national interest in dealing with the Rohingya and other perceived aliens: ‘The Tatmadaw’s ultranationalist commander-in-chief, who trafficked a different race from the Bangladesh–Rakhine border by taking money, [and] the USDP, which issued white cards to nearly one million Bengali, trafficked them into the country and allowed them to vote’ (BC10). Here, the national army and the USDP were seen as corrupt institutions serving the interests of aliens rather than of native Bamar.

Similarly, people tried to paint Min Aung Hlaing as insufficiently nationalistic, a puppet of China, too close to military leaders in Thailand, losing disputes with Bangladesh and not apologizing for it, and failing to deal effectively with the Rohingya (BC6, BC7, BC9, BC10 and BC13). One post used a gendered metaphor, arguing that China ‘will not indulge his mistress but will secretly support her. Communications will be cut off if [the SAC] gets restless’ (BC9).

#### 6.5 Ethnic armed organizations before the coup

Before the coup, many social media posts cast EAOs as ‘insurgents’, ‘terrorists’, ‘organizations on the terror list’ and perpetrators of ‘civil war’. The dominant vocabulary was ‘peace talks’, ‘peace process’ and ‘peace dialogue’, all designed to ‘defuse insurgency’, ‘establish a ceasefire’ and ‘reach a ceasefire agreement’. The key message was that ‘the door is open’ to EAOs to pursue peace (EB21). During 5 years of NLD government, however, there was no breakthrough in negotiations. Both sides continued to differ on constitutional amendments (EB30). The NLD also had no clear policy for establishing a federal democracy and no experience of dealing with EAOs at the macro-level (EB8).

Win Myint argued that insurgency endangered local people (EB7). At the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee, Aung San Suu Kyi appealed for inclusive democracy, yet no incentives were offered to EAOs and no new strategy was devised (EB9 and EB12). One pundit predicted that relations with the national races would deteriorate because of the NLD’s good and improving links with military leaders (EB10). The argument was that conflict could not be resolved because governments and military leaders had always promoted racial supremacy. Indeed, NLD interference in Rakhine state could amount to voter manipulation (EB17 and EB26). One post noted an interesting take by Aung San Suu Kyi: the Rohingya issue is a Rakhine state problem, caused by lack of the rule of law, not sectarian tension. The result is that ‘terrorists can grow in number’. The global community should pay attention

to the terrorism problem (EB27). Dr. Hla Kyaw Zaw of the Communist Party argued that democracy itself is not enough to solve ‘ethnic affairs’ (EB13). A legal expert close to the military claimed that federalism could not solve ethnic armed conflict (EB14).

In the pre-coup period, many key actors were either ‘fighting’ or ‘not fighting’ but at the same time ‘not talking’. Different dynamics of transition for EAOs were discussed (EB16). Min Aung Hlaing was generally viewed negatively, cast as not smart, not strategic and lacking in credentials. The argument was that in a system of fraudulent, discipline-flourishing democracy, ethnic minorities needed to vote for the NLD in order to prevent the USDP, and the military, from winning (EB23).

Even before the coup, though, several posts by elite-level actors called for change. One proposal was for constitutional reform to subject the military to civilian control through the presidency and curtail impunity (EB1 and EB18). Another was for a multi-ethnic army to end Bamar dominion and the military rewriting of history (EB4). This person held that the civil war had been misinterpreted, since it was not the Karen who had started it but rather Burman communists, pointing to an ideological, not ethnic, origin. Here, a change in allegiance was seen as possible, with individuals fighting for the army at independence but against it in 1988. In 2020, during the pre-election period, there was concern that the army was using propaganda to discredit the upcoming poll and criticism of military leaders for proposing that EAOs intervene (EB6).

### **6.6 Ethnic armed organizations after the coup**

After the coup, EAOs were viewed as providing protection to participants in the CDM and assisting people from urban areas affected by violence (EC1 and EC4). They were frequently viewed as the foundation for a new federal army. Alongside a rare call for revenge (EC28), they were encouraged to lead attacks against the military, since they have public support, but ‘are not enemies of China’ (EC9). Several posts documented the intensification of conflict in ethnic areas (EC12 and EC16). Very quickly, then, there was a huge contrast to the negative light in which EAOs had been viewed pre-coup, and a switch to positive affirmation of the help they could provide in Myanmar’s time of crisis. One post also mentioned the ‘outreach’ EAOs could undertake in fighting the COVID-19 pandemic (EC22). Against all this, one post still saw EAOs negatively, identifying them as ‘beggars’ spreading hatred to gain government positions (EC23). In general, EAOs after the coup were seen as playing a positive instrumental role, though normative and ideological labels of brotherhood, anti-fascist commitment, anti-racial supremacy and standing for truth were often invoked (EC7, EC9 and EC10).

It is apparent from social media posts that after the coup the pro-democracy movement either split on the issue of EAOs or significantly changed its position. Previously, the NLD leadership had criticized EAOs, sided with the military and stood firm against the Rohingya. Against this, the new generation of leaders in the CRPH and NUG, together with some young street protesters, argued that EAOs should not be viewed as terrorists, should therefore be removed from the terrorist list, and should join a federal army (EC2 and EC15). Underpinning this position were arguments for a focus on diversity (EC4), outreach to other armed groups (EC11) and fighting the common enemy (EC21). A famous singer posted: ‘I would like to make a request to the interim President. I think the people also agree with me. I would like you to allow the ethnic armed groups such as DKBA, KIA, KNU and AA and the federal army, which will be formed in the near future, to come to the urban areas for people in trouble’ (EC4). While the internal politics of EAOs and the relationship between EAOs and the NUG are more complicated than people living in the heartland realize, it is undeniable that the coup prompted a more positive view of EAOs among the Bamar. Most EAOs published objections to the coup, although negotiations with the NUG to form a federal army stalled.

The coup thus reconfigured Myanmar’s political landscape, altering the position of EAOs and of the Rohingya. In general, there was support for a new constitution with provisions for ethnic minority autonomy, a secular state and civilian control of the military (EC5). The NUG was seen as having wider reach and being more open to dialogue (EC25). Finally, some posts acknowledged that EAOs needed to change as well, notably in their views of Bamar supremacy and attitudes towards the

NLD. Such change should be possible because the Bamar were indoctrinated into supremacist views (EC10). In general, there was recognition that the NLD and the wider democracy movement need to devise a strategy to embrace all the national races (EC19).

### 6.7 National races before the coup

Before the coup, much talk about Myanmar's ethnic minorities used legal language, portraying the Rohingya as illegal immigrants (NB10). Only very rarely were members of national races referred to as brothers and sisters (NB11). Nevertheless, expressions of respect towards the national races were quite common (NB12). Broadly, ethnic minorities were seen as different, and the sense was that that should remain the case even if they merited support (NB1). On occasion, this could turn into an idealistic, sentimental, even patronizing view of the national races, promoting the need for both unity and difference (NB4). It was also used in contrast with the British and Thai as outsiders, when 'national races and citizens' were again invoked (NB13 and NB6). A standard formulation was that 'members of the national races and Bamar' (NB7) were capable of coexisting peacefully (NB8).

Before the coup there were variations among groups. After the 2020 general election, but before the 2021 coup, the NLD reached out to the ethnic minorities, generating some appreciation of unity between the NLD government, the people and the national-race parties (NB2). There were also calls for the NLD to limit the role of the military in politics, and for the national races to join hands with the government on this issue (NB17). Against this, a member of the USDP claimed to be a champion of the national races because the NLD was misappropriating domestic and foreign funding (NB14). Predictably, a nationalist page sought to exclude the Rohingya, noting that they were not among the 135 official minorities (NB16).

### 6.8 National races after the coup

After the coup, as with EAOs, a new national race vocabulary emerged. What had been 'insurgents' became 'citizens', 'the public', 'the people', 'true brothers and sisters', 'sisters and brothers of whatever religion' and so on (NC2, NC6 and NC8). Again, the change may have been driven by instrumental concerns, since within weeks of the coup the opposition was sheltering under EAOs and the possibility of establishing a federal army to protect citizens had become central to pro-democracy discourse (NC2). The shift came with growing recognition of the power of ethnic minority groups and of the signal importance of creating federal structures, notably through the NUG and a federal army (NC3 and NC12). Alongside these changes was another vocabulary shift. Defections were described from the army to 'liberated areas' (NC5), pointing to the emergence of a territorial understanding as an umbrella concept for the change in perception of ethnic minorities.

New pro-democracy leaders in the CRPH and NUG sought to portray the military as perpetrators of crimes against all: the national races, Rohingya brothers and sisters and unarmed protestors (NC7 and NC13). They argued that throughout history the national army has committed crimes against humanity: in 1988, 1997, 2017 and 2021 (NC16). They campaigned for the NUG to include people with an ethnic minority background (NC8). They promoted diversity and saw it as the foundation of state strength (NC8). Celebration of being 'truly united' was seen as a clear point of difference between the SAC and the NLD (NC8).

It is possible that a rare grassroots perspective revealed an ability to put oneself in the shoes of the previously oppressed through an argument that the military divided people and military propaganda falsely construed ethnic minorities as insurgents. An actress posted on Facebook:

Now I understand why the national races hate Bamar. It was the military that did it. But they probably hate us in the same way we hate ASEAN countries for not siding with us. Promise yourself from now on. Fight with them when there are violations of the human rights of the national races and Bengali. If you laugh at the news on MRTV and MWD channels now because they tell

lies, the national races will laugh at us for thinking ethnic armed groups are insurgents because we grew up watching news and war movies (NC14).

Similarly, an ethnic minority perspective appears to suggest that on both sides Myanmar citizens wish to get together, though in doing so it preserves the sides (NC15). Broadly, the notion of national race seemed to remain central to official discourse, as the NUG prime minister, in appealing to collective strength, nevertheless addressed that appeal to ‘people of the national races’ (NC26).

## 7. Analysis and findings

Our exploratory qualitative observations provide support for our hypothesis that ethnic relations in Myanmar improved after the 2021 coup d’état. To generate still greater support, we next turned to quantitative analysis. Evidence in support of our hypothesis would be present if the most viral Facebook posts before the coup reveal predominantly negative, exclusive attitudes towards minority ethnic groups, while the most viral posts after the coup display chiefly positive, inclusive attitudes. That is, our hypothesis would be supported if the most viral posts after the coup more often manifest positive perceptions of ethnic relations than the most viral posts before the coup.

Our coding scheme sought to capture several aspects of ethnicity: depictions of a group in a negative or exclusionary light, suggesting it does not have a place in Myanmar society; depictions of a group in a positive or inclusive light, pointing towards an inclusive society; and arguments for change in the current situation. We devised an initial coding scheme of 16 items. However, the posts we had collected did not provide us with the depth typical of other qualitative data sources, such as interviews and focus groups. Moreover, some items were less frequently cited and could easily be incorporated into a small set of binaries: negative vs positive attitudes; exclusive vs inclusive conceptions of society; and incremental vs fundamental change. We therefore consolidated our coding scheme into eight items (Table 1). Coding was then conducted by two independent readers, with consensus attained in 73 per cent of posts. To resolve residual differences, the third coder served as adjudicator. When consensus could not be reached, multiple codes were retained. However, this happened only infrequently. Finally, we conducted an analysis of individual items (codes) and, in order to generate robust results, created a rating variable that would capture all posts. Each code was therefore rated as negative (−1), neutral (0) or positive (+1). In cases of multiple codes, we took an average rating.

Analysis of individual items for all groups together shows that after the coup the frequency of negative posts decreased and the frequency of positive posts increased. Likewise, after the coup calls for cosmetic change within the framework of the discriminatory 2008 Constitution diminished, while calls for fundamental change expanded (Table 2). Taking the average occurrence of an item before and after the coup enabled us to compare the means and determine their significance by using an independent group *t*-test. This revealed that after the coup negative attitudes and demands for incremental change significantly decreased, while positive attitudes and demands for fundamental change significantly increased.

However, this comparison is based on the assumption that occurrences of an item before and after the coup are nominally the same. We realized, though, that we could not be sure whether observed increases and decreases fully reflected posts’ virality. If negative posts before the coup were more viral than negative posts after the coup, for example, the observed mean difference would not reflect reality. For this reason, we used virality as a weighting variable in conducting our analysis. The richness of the virality data makes the results highly significant for all items. They show a decrease in posts about negative attitudes, an exclusive society and incremental change and an increase in posts about positive attitudes, an inclusive society and fundamental change.

To this point, we have looked at individual items for all groups taken together. But is an improvement in ethnic relations apparent for each group? To analyse individual groups, we used overall rating as a summary of all other codes, transposing our hypothesis: ‘Group rating improves after the coup’. Examining the results for individual groups and for all groups together, we found that before the coup

**Table 1.** Coding scheme

Code	Definition	Rating
Negative attitudes and labels	Expressing contempt, condemnation, negatively labelling an ethnic group (e.g., as intruders, invaders, insurgents, terrorists, foreign elements, troublemakers, etc.). Included are criticisms of individuals or institutions viewing ethnic minorities in a positive light, and implicit remarks, such as they have weapons, suggesting they will use them against us as our enemies.	-1
Exclusive society	Arguing for a legal, constitutional, historical framework that is exclusive and fuels or reinforces negative attitudes and labels (e.g., arguing for anti-Islam laws, invoking historical entitlement to territory, treating one group as superior, arguing for ethnic purity, seeking to erase a group from history, etc.).	-1
Positive attitudes and labels	Referring to an ethnic group positively or expressing positive attitudes (e.g., empathy, sympathy, admiration, support for the group, including sentimentalizing expressions, such as brothers and sisters, we are all victims of the military, etc.). Included are calls to end negative labelling, instrumental views of a group as a positive force fighting the military, and expressions of positive personal change (e.g., apology, regret over past views).	1
Inclusive society	Invoking inclusive concepts by explicitly referring to the public as all people, arguing for human rights, justice, non-discrimination and respect. Since language may take time to change, expressions retaining an exclusive vocabulary accompanied by an expanded context (e.g., adding all ethnic groups together, calling for unity of all, etc.) or situations in which these aspects are presented in a positive light are included. Also included is criticism of actors and attitudes that are antidemocratic, exclusive and discriminatory (e.g., calls for abandoning the list of terror organizations). Excluded is the partially inclusive vocabulary of democracy and citizens, which is normally inclusive in other countries but in Myanmar historically excluded the Rohingya.	1
Incremental change	Arguing for change in ethnic relations within the current constitutional framework. This comprises, for example, calling for peace talks, negotiations, ceasefires, coexistence, getting together, collaboration between ethnic minority groups and the government, and cooperation among ethnic minority groups. Included is criticism of the lack of reform cast within the context of the existing political process.	0
Fundamental change	Arguing for multi-ethnic change in the structure of government outside the framework of the existing constitution (e.g., abandoning the 2008 Constitution, drafting new a constitution, establishing a federal army, making territorial changes, forming a unity government with ethnic minorities).	1
Other	Classifications that could not be attributed to the main codes above.	0
Unclassified	Unable to assign a code to a post.	0

**Table 2.** Major themes in Facebook posts on ethnic minorities before and after Myanmar’s 2021 coup

Themes	Before the coup (n = 88)		After the coup (n = 90)		Mean difference (unweighted) <sup>a</sup>	Mean difference (weighted for virality) <sup>a</sup>
	Frequency	Mean	Frequency	Mean		
Negative attitudes	20	0.23	7	0.08	-0.15**	-0.10***
Exclusive society	5	0.06	1	0.01	-0.05 <sup>^</sup>	-0.04***
Positive attitudes	17	0.19	30	0.33	0.14*	0.05***
Inclusive society	9	0.10	16	0.18	0.08	0.01***
Incremental change	23	0.27	2	0.02	-0.24***	-0.22***
Fundamental change	0	0.00	24	0.27	0.27***	0.48***
Other (neutral) views	16	0.18	7	0.08	-0.10*	-0.11***
Undetermined	6	0.07	8	0.09	0.02	-0.02***

<sup>a</sup>t-test: <sup>^</sup>p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.

EAOs and especially Bengali/Rohingya were rated negatively, and ethnic minority groups were rated more or less neutrally. After the coup, the means of the rating of each group and the means of the rating of all groups together increased significantly. Weighting the data by virality generated even more robust increases for each group as measured by *t*-test (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Rating of themes in Facebook posts before and after Myanmar's 2021 coup

Group (keyword searched)	Number of posts		Virality range		Mean rating		Mean difference of rating <sup>b</sup>	
	Before coup	After coup	Before coup	After coup	Before coup	After coup	Unweighted	Weighted
Ethnic armed organization	30	30	1,964–55,643	4,502–314,389	−0.03	0.85	0.88***	0.97***
National race	30	30	16,996–284,279	61,876–435,125	0.54	0.83	0.30*	0.36***
Bengali/Rohingya	15 + 15	15 + 15	326–185,254	149–136,050	−0.43	0.27	0.70***	1.00***
Total	178 <sup>a</sup>		326–284,279	149–435,125	0.01	0.65	0.64***	0.59***

<sup>a</sup>Two duplicate cases were deleted.

<sup>b</sup>t-test: ^p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.

**Table 4.** Virality of change in rating after Myanmar's 2021 coup (OLS linear regression)

Dependent variable	Virality			
	Model 1		Model 2	
Independent variables	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
(Constant)	33,835	6,212	92,756	9,025
After coup	14,671	12,423	20,880 <sup>^</sup>	10,741
(Positive) Rating	27,103***	7,404	8,793	7,059
(Positive) Rating × After coup	26,009 <sup>^</sup>	14,807,807	38,731**	12,725,725
Ethnic armed organization			−82,232***	10,804
Bengali/Rohingya			−80,544***	11,820
R <sup>2</sup> (adj. R <sup>2</sup> )	0.152 (0.137)		0.394 (0.377)	
N	178			

*B*, unstandardized coefficient; *S.E.*, standard error.

<sup>^</sup>p < 0.1, \*p < 0.05, \*\*p < 0.01, \*\*\*p < 0.001.

Our final way of looking at the data was through the prism of virality. Using virality not for weighting but as a dependent variable enabled us to examine whether nominal improvement in ethnic relations after the coup as measured by rating was accompanied by an increase in virality. In so doing, we transposed our hypothesis from '(positive) rating of ethnic relations improved after the coup' to '(positive) rating of ethnic relations generated more virality after the coup'. Our results derive from an ordinary least squares linear regression model (Table 4).

We observe that posts after the coup are on average more viral than posts before, though the results fail to reach a statistically significant level (model 1). We also observe that positive characteristics of ethnic groups, as captured in the rating, are significantly more viral. A one-point increase in (positive) rating increases virality by more than 27,000 engagements. The interaction term between the rating and the coup, which is essential for our hypothesis testing, is marginally significant, suggesting that a positive rating further increased the virality of posts after the coup ( $p < 0.1$ ). However, these results do not take into account different dynamics of virality for distinct ethnic groups. After controlling for ethnic group (model 2), we observe that the virality of a (positive) rating after the coup becomes larger with more than 38,000 engagements and is highly significant ( $p < 0.01$ ).

## 8. Conclusion

In the aftermath of Myanmar's 2021 military coup, perceptions of all ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya, changed. Following the coup, there were fewer negative posts about ethnic minorities and an exclusive society, and more positive posts about ethnic minorities and an inclusive society. Similarly, there were fewer posts arguing for piecemeal change of the current exclusive system and more posts



pleading for fundamental change. Overall positive changes were statistically significant, even when taking account of the virality of posts and controlling for different groups. Moreover, the virality of positive posts increased after the coup. We therefore conclude that our initial hypothesis is supported by evidence: horizontal ethnic relations improved after the coup.

The dynamic of the change embraced, but ultimately superseded, the simple ‘enemy of my enemy is my friend’ logic. First, several posts after the coup explicitly conveyed empathy for the Rohingya, and there was a large increase in engagement with posts containing that keyword. Before the coup, this took place mainly through foreign media outlets with a large Facebook following. After the coup, by contrast, it was apparently driven by declining domestic controversy around the term. Second, while this change was accompanied by some value shift, the change in perception of ethnic groups also reflected instrumental concerns. The NUG did not take a clear position on the Rohingya issue until early June, when it released a policy paper promising justice and citizenship for the Rohingya, and repatriation for Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (National Unity Government, 2021). Moreover, the paper was written after US lawmakers accused Kyaw Moe Tun, Myanmar’s ambassador to the UN, of being vague about Rohingya rights (House Foreign Affairs Committee, 2021). In addition, the value shift was associated with the politics of ethnic armed conflict in Myanmar. Many EAOs have fought with the national army for decades. After the coup, they alone within the society had the capacity to engage rapidly in armed resistance. Third, the 2021 coup provoked a total reconfiguration of Myanmar’s political landscape. Partly this was because most of the NLD high command was quickly rounded up and put in jail, thereby creating space for a new generation of leaders to emerge. Dr. Sasa from the CRPH was explicit in distancing himself not only from preceding military governments, but also from the civilian government led by Aung San Suu Kyi. Others, including members of the old NLD leadership group, made a less radical break with the past. In consequence, the position of EAOs and official ethnic minorities changed. In the evolving political landscape, the position of the Rohingya also altered. While still not fully embraced, the Rohingya and issues associated with them are now secondary to democracy for many Myanmar people.

Our data also point to a changing dynamic of nationalism in Myanmar. The new nationalism moves not only beyond the top-down approach historically deployed by a Bamar-dominated state to expand control over ethnic minorities, but also beyond bottom-up outbursts witnessed in communal violence against ethnic minorities, notably the Rohingya. The nationalism emerging in response to the 2021 coup thereby departs from an exclusive mode based on ethnic identity towards a more inclusive mode based on shared identity and communal solidarity (Miller, 2000).

Our study also makes a theoretical contribution. Myanmar provides a counterfactual case of a military coup that improved ethnic relations between the majority and minorities. Before the coup, the Bamar majority cautiously condoned, or at least did not openly oppose, ongoing military campaigns against ethnic minorities. Once the coup had taken place, people united across ethnic faultlines to repudiate military leaders and their power grab. The main trigger for this improvement in ethnic relations was the fact that both the majority and minorities fell victim to the coup.

The central argument that emerges from our findings is that in the immediate aftermath of Myanmar’s 2021 coup, ethnic relations improved significantly as a result of changing political configurations. Since this was also apparently the case following Burma’s 1988 uprising, but was not sustained when the NLD gained power in the 2010s, further analysis will be required to determine whether the impact is lasting.

**Supplementary Material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/ORWDTV>

**Acknowledgements.** The authors are grateful for incisive and constructive reviewer feedback. They acknowledge Hong Kong Research Grants Council funding (project number LU340613), which fed into this project.

**Conflict of interest.** The authors have no competing interests to declare.

## References

- Badgley, JH and Holliday I** (2018) Democracy. In Simpson A, Farrelly N and Holliday I (eds), *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Myanmar*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 35–42.
- Cheesman N** (2017) How in Myanmar ‘national races’ came to surpass citizenship and exclude Rohingya. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 47, 461–483.
- Cho V** (2018) Ethnicity and identity. In Simpson A, Farrelly N and Holliday I (eds), *Routledge Handbook*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 43–51.
- Clark NL and Worger WH** (2016) *South Africa: The Rise and Fall of Apartheid*, 3rd Edn. London: Routledge.
- Cockburn P** (2006) *The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq*. London: Verso.
- CrowdTangle** (2021) Available at <https://help.crowdtangle.com/en/> (accessed 1 July 2021).
- David R and Holliday I** (2018) *Liberalism and Democracy in Myanmar*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- De Nevers R** (1993) Democratization and ethnic conflict. *Survival* 35, 31–48.
- Diamond C and Thingyan M** (2020) Myanmar opposition slams Aung San Suu Kyi’s NLD election win as baseless. *DWI*, 2 December. Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/myanmar-opposition-slams-aung-san-suu-kyis-nld-election-win-as-baseless/a-55793676>
- Economist** (2021) What is the Milk Tea Alliance?, 24 March.
- Evans RJ** (2005) *The Third Reich in Power, 1933–1939: How the Nazis Won Over the Hearts and Minds of a Nation*. New York: Penguin.
- Harff B and Gurr TR** (2004) *Ethnic Conflict in World Politics*, 2nd Edn. Boulder: Westview.
- Horowitz DL** (1993) Democracy in divided societies. *Journal of Democracy* 4, 18–38.
- House Foreign Affairs Committee** (2021) The unfolding crisis in Burma. 4 May. Available at <https://foreignaffairs.house.gov/2021/5/the-unfolding-crisis-in-burma> (accessed 2 July 2021).
- Human Rights Council** (2018) Report of the detailed findings of the Independent International Fact-finding Mission on Myanmar. 17 September. A/HRC/39/CRP.2.
- Human Rights Watch** (2013) ‘All you can do is pray’: crimes against humanity and ethnic cleansing of Rohingya Muslims in Burma’s Arakan state. 22 April.
- Kataria S** (2018) Explaining ethnicity: primordialism vs instrumentalism. *Advances in Social Sciences Research Journal* 5, 130–135.
- Khan Y** (2008) *The Great Partition: The Making of India and Pakistan*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Miller D** (2000) *Citizenship and National Identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Mousseau DY** (2001) Democratizing with ethnic divisions: a source of conflict? *Journal of Peace Research* 38, 547–567.
- NapoleonCat** (2021) Facebook users in Myanmar. January. Available at <https://napoleoncat.com/stats/facebook-users-in-myanmar/2021/01/> (accessed 2 July 2021).
- National Unity Government** (2021) Policy position on the Rohingya in Rakhine state. 3 June. Available at <https://gov.nug-myanmar.org/2021/06/03/policy-position-on-the-rohingya-in-rakhine-state/> (accessed 2 July 2021).
- Osaghae EE** (2004) Political transitions and ethnic conflict in Africa. *Third World Quarterly* 21, 221–240.
- Pavković A** (2000) *The Fragmentation of Yugoslavia: Nationalism and War in the Balkans*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Radio Free Asia** (2021) Bangladesh relying on world community to press Myanmar junta on Rohingya repatriation. 25 May. Available at <https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/relying-05252021165631.html> (accessed 1 July 2021).
- Rahman S** (2019) Myanmar’s ‘Rohingya’ vs ‘Bengali’ hate speech debate. *The Diplomat*. 21 December. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2019/12/myanmars-rohingya-vs-bengali-hate-speech-debate/> (accessed 1 July 2021).
- Ridout B, McKay M, Amon K and Campbell A** (2019) *Mobile Myanmar: The Impact of Social Media on Young People in Conflict-Affected Regions of Myanmar*. Yangon: Save the Children Myanmar and University of Sydney.
- San Yamin Aung** (2020) Myanmar military launches review of election after proxy party calls foul. *The Irrawaddy*, 1 December.
- Scott JC** (2009) *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Simons M and Beech H** (2019) Aung San Suu Kyi defends Myanmar against Rohingya genocide accusations. *New York Times*, 11 December.
- Slater D** (2012) Strong-state democratization in Malaysia and Singapore. *Journal of Democracy* 23, 19–33.
- Thant Myint-U** (2001) *The Making of Modern Burma*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thant Myint-U** (2020) *The Hidden History of Burma: Race, Capitalism, and the Crisis of Democracy in the 21st Century*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Voice of America** (2018) U.S. broadcaster loses Myanmar outlet over Rohingya name, 11 June. Available at <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/us-broadcaster-loses-myanmar-outlet-over-rohingya-name> (accessed 2 July 2021).
- Wade F** (2019) *Myanmar’s Enemy Within: Buddhist Violence and the Making of a Muslim ‘Other’*, 2nd Edn. London: Zed Books.
- Walton MJ** (2008) Ethnicity, conflict, and history in Burma: the myths of Panglong. *Asian Survey* 48, 889–910.
- Walton MJ** (2015) The disciplining discourse of unity in Burmese politics. *Journal of Burma Studies* 19, 1–26.

**Cite this article:** David R, Aung Kaung Myat, Holliday I (2022). Can regime change improve ethnic relations? Perception of ethnic minorities after the 2021 coup in Myanmar. *Japanese Journal of Political Science* 23, 89–104. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S146810992200007X>