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## **Pandemic Weaponisation and Non-State Welfare in Pre- and Post-Coup Myanmar**

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### **Abstract**

The Myanmar military's seizure of power in February 2021 led to a breakdown in the collaborative state–society relations that had characterised the COVID-19 response during the first year of the pandemic. This chapter examines the dynamics of cooperation and contention between successive administrations (civilian and military) and the enduring role of Myanmar's vibrant, non-state charitable sector in pandemic response prior to and following the coup. Assessing claims made prior to the coup that the intermediation of state pandemic social aid was weaponised by the National League for Democracy, the chapter focuses on how the junta's abandonment of the government's limited social stimulus initiatives, and their adoption of strategies to empower pro-military or neutral loyalists at a local level, has fractured the state–society collaboration that had helped contain and manage COVID-19 in 2020. The chapter identifies four key strategies

through which the junta has sought to discipline Myanmar's vibrant, non-state social sector: suppressing perceived dissenters, empowering loyalists, disciplining charitable actors and partnering with neutral welfare groups. We conclude by reflecting on debates about the meaning of neutrality in the context of the new dictatorship, urging the need for greater international support to non-state welfare provision in the short term.

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With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, pre-existing dynamics of economic inequality, political polarisation and democratic decay were exacerbated globally and across Southeast Asia (Croissant 2020; Aspinall et al. 2021; Gadarian, Goodman & Pepinsky 2022). Myanmar is no exception in this regard, with the pandemic intensifying deeply ingrained political divides, especially over the distribution of government social aid to populations whose livelihoods were upheaved by the socioeconomic downturn and lockdowns. Throughout the pandemic, both the elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi and the military administration since February 2021 were accused of exploiting COVID-19 to benefit their political allies and entrench their social dominance. This chapter assesses these claims by examining the dynamics of what we term *pandemic weaponisation* before and after the military's return to power in February 2021. Initially enlisted by critics of the National League for Democracy (NLD) to describe pandemic response efforts in 2020, we use the concept of weaponisation to examine patterns of state–society relations before and after the military coup. We argue that, whereas the NLD government encouraged non-state social responses during 2020, after seizing power in February 2021, the State Administrative Council (SAC) brutally suppressed political opposition and disrupted non-state pandemic responses. The result has been the fracturing of state attempts to manage the pandemic via societal partners while paradoxically heightening reliance on neighbourhood and charitable response efforts to survive and resist the dictatorship.

This chapter draws on a national survey conducted in January 2021 by the co-authors and colleagues at The Australian National University, the University of Massachusetts and Innovations for Poverty Action, along with over 50 interviews with ordinary people, political candidates and welfare activists conducted prior to and after the 2021 military coup. Interviews with respondents in seven states and regions were conducted between

2020 and 2022 by a team of research assistants trained and coordinated by the co-authors. To manage COVID-19 and post-coup safety concerns, the bulk of discussions occurred virtually via encrypted communications. Transcripts were anonymised and translated into English and are available via a public archive.<sup>1</sup>

The sections of this chapter proceed by outlining the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 and governmental social responses, initially during the civilian government and then since the return to military dictatorship. The first section analyses the inadequacy and limitations of state social aid during 2020 and how these dynamics fed claims of politicisation and pandemic weaponisation by minority parties and interests against the NLD government in the months prior to the February 2021 coup. The second section highlights the junta's abandonment of the NLD government's limited social stimulus initiatives and examines how the collapse of state–society cooperation impacted pandemic health and social responses during 2021. Informed by interviews with grassroots welfare activists and businesspeople since the coup, the third section highlights how the junta's suppression of charitable COVID-19 response efforts and dismissal of striking government staff further entrenched the role of private, communal and ethnic social service providers both in providing aid and in sustaining resistance to the new dictatorship.

The chapter concludes that the nascent state–society cooperation of the NLD-era has come to a dramatic end since the coup, deepening the reliance of ordinary people on private and non-state providers. In this sense, the weaponisation of COVID-19 by the junta has compounded a process of state social outsourcing that has been ongoing for decades, entrenching societal reliance on non-state social actors both to survive and resist the dictatorship (McCarthy 2023).

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1 English versions of transcripts from selected oral history interviews focusing on the pandemic and conducted with Myanmar respondents between 2020 and 2022, including several cited here, are accessible from the National University of Singapore Asia Research Institute archive for the 'Living with COVID-19 in Southeast Asia' project: [ec2-54-169-180-248.ap-southeast-1.compute.amazonaws.com/omeka-s/s/living-with-covid-19-in-sea/page/welcome](https://ec2-54-169-180-248.ap-southeast-1.compute.amazonaws.com/omeka-s/s/living-with-covid-19-in-sea/page/welcome)

## **Pandemic response under the NLD (January 2020 – January 2021)**

### **Health and social impacts of COVID-19**

The arrival of COVID-19 in Myanmar claimed fewer lives in the initial months of the pandemic than in global hotspots in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States. A variety of factors helped reduce the transmission and severity of cases in the first few months of the pandemic. These included a rapid drop in incoming visitors from hotspot countries, along with community willingness to set up and run quarantine facilities and partner with local administrators to enforce health protocols.

Even though the initial wave of COVID-19 cases was relatively modest, by March 2020 Myanmar's historically under-resourced health system was strained. This was especially the case in Yangon where there were shortages of protective gear for medical personnel and overcrowding of hospital facilities. In response, the elected government, after initially downplaying the virus, began restricting non-essential entry to the country and expanded resourcing for the health response by redirecting domestic budgets to pandemic response and soliciting international aid.

In late March 2020, it became clear that Myanmar was experiencing a catastrophic economic downturn far worse than the direct and immediate health mortality of the virus. Disruptions to global supply chains, border closures and declining global demand in trade-exposed industries, such as garment manufacturing and tourism, prompted layoffs across major sectors of Myanmar's economy, precipitating rapid declines in Myanmar's agricultural exports (World Bank 2020). Meanwhile, the government's imposition of lockdowns and market closures in urban centres, along with the laying-off of Myanmar migrant workers abroad, hit the remittances on which many households had become reliant.

Just prior to the Burmese New Year (*Thingyan*) in April 2020, the NLD government announced its COVID-19 Economic Relief Plan. Informed by modelling that predicted significant shrinkage in Myanmar's economy and a spike in poverty rates in the absence of government action, the initial USD2 billion stimulus package, supported partly by international partners, comprised spending for emergency loans to businesses and trade financing (Bello et al. 2020). It also included around USD210 million in cash and food

to support the most vulnerable (Kyaw San Wai 2020). The initial package accounted for 2.5–3 per cent of Myanmar's gross domestic product, below the average Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) commitment of 3.7 per cent and significantly less than Thailand, which had committed close to 9 per cent by mid-2020 (Martinus & Seah 2020).

The design of the package was constrained by Myanmar's minimal tax revenue, skeletal social welfare state bequeathed by decades of autocratic austerity and the intimacy of business networks with the NLD who had advocated against tax reform. The vast majority of funds ultimately benefited large formal businesses, comprising less than half of Myanmar's economy. Meanwhile, assistance provided to the needy, initially ration packs during *Thingyan* in 2020 and later cash payments, were distributed on an explicitly one-off basis to deter expectations of ongoing entitlement to state support.

A severe wave of COVID-19 infections in July 2020 led to further degradation in the economic and health situation. Yet state aid remained insufficient, constrained by the reluctance of Myanmar's policymakers to accrue sovereign debt and the absence of a well-developed state social apparatus capable of distributing aid directly to needy households. As a result, few households and businesses received any state social aid during 2020. A January 2021 national survey of 700 respondents from across all states and regions conducted by the co-authors in partnership with The Australian National University and locals found that almost 80 per cent of households had reduced food intake in the seven days prior, while 30 per cent reported taking on new loans—often with interest—to pay for basic necessities (McCarthy, Ross & Myat The Thitsar 2021). Of the overall sample, fewer than 25 per cent of respondents reported having received government aid in January 2021, significantly less than in Thailand (68 per cent), Indonesia (46 per cent) and Malaysia (71 per cent) where the same questions were asked (McCarthy 2021). In Myanmar, those who received government support said it often lasted no more than a few days, with 60 per cent saying it lasted less than a week.

In addition to being insufficient to meet needs, government aid in 2020 was poorly targeted, leaving many confused as to why their equally poor neighbours received support while they did not. This pattern was borne out in the January 2021 survey, with households who were reducing meals in the seven days prior to the survey only slightly more likely (3 per cent) to have received government aid via rations or cash transfers than their less needy neighbours. For minority party supporters, the limitations of the

state's social response fed a larger narrative about the NLD government's exploitation of the pandemic for political benefit and broader majoritarian approach to opposition. These perceptions were especially strong in Rakhine State, where, with the support of the civilian government, the intensification of conflict between the Myanmar armed forces (Tatmadaw or *sit-tat*)<sup>2</sup> and the Arakan Army throughout 2020 was seen as posing a far greater threat to the lives of ordinary people than COVID-19 (Khin Khin Mra 2020).

## Political polarisation of government pandemic management

The inadequacy and poor targeting of government social aid became a partisan obsession for non-NLD party activists in the run-up to and following the November 2020 elections. Minority party supporters complained that the government was using the pandemic, especially the stimulus package, to reward supporters and punish critics. The polarisation of perspectives was borne out in more than 30 interviews and in the national survey conducted prior to the coup—both of which highlighted the mediating role of partisan identity in shaping perceptions of governmental social aid.

Respondents from NLD backgrounds recognised flaws in the government's management of COVID-19, with 40 per cent in the national survey saying that government aid was not being distributed fairly or to the neediest. However, in interviews, voters in NLD strongholds such as lowland Myanmar tended to attribute these flaws to local confusion and administrative inadequacy rather than systematic failure or corruption on the part of the NLD government. A 67-year-old ethnic Bamar (majority ethnic group) shopkeeper from central Myanmar, for instance, recounted how neighbours blamed their local administrators for their exclusion from state social aid:

Some of my neighbours did not get the [government] assistance, which made some tensions in the neighbourhood. Some went to the ward office to complain regarding why some people got the assistance, and some were excluded. (Interview, October 2020)

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2 Since the February 2021 military coup and subsequent atrocities against civilians, some Myanmar scholars have debated the linguistic politics of referring to Myanmar's state army with its chosen moniker of Tatmadaw given that the honorific '*daw*' implies royal or glorious status. Some have preferred to label it *sit-tat*, simply meaning 'military', though there are linguistic and analytical implications and limitations to using that term as well (see Aung Kaung Myat 2022). Consequently, we prefer to use the terms 'state army' or 'armed forces' to refer to the Tatmadaw.

Supporters of small political parties that won very few head-to-head races with the NLD at the 2015 and 2020 elections were more critical of government social aid. Some viewed it as an example of NLD malfeasance. For example, 69 per cent of Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) voters and 48 per cent of ethnic minority party supporters surveyed just prior to the 2021 coup said that government COVID-19 assistance was not reaching the households who needed it most. In interviews, several minority party supporters described the mediation of government aid via township COVID-19 response committees led by members of parliament, along with eligibility checks and distribution efforts led by ward and village-tract administrators, as a form of vote-buying. As many of the officials and informal community representatives involved were elected or appointed during the NLD term (and were often supporters of the party), those who missed out or received minimal state aid during 2020, especially ethnic minorities and supporters of the USDP, felt that NLD loyalists were exploiting their role to benefit supporters and exclude partisan opponents and non-Bamar voters. Social media posts claiming that NLD candidates were describing pandemic social aid as a gift from the party for which voters should be grateful reinforced these perceptions. A 31-year-old teacher and election booth staffer in Mon State described one such post she encountered online just prior to the November 2020 election:

I heard people who received financial support are not all poor families and widows and that some middle-class people also received money. I also saw on social media a post from an ethnic Mon woman who said that the village administrator who is an NLD supporter used the COVID-19 support to buy votes from the villagers. The woman refused support and said, 'I cannot sell my vote to this peacock party [symbol of the NLD]'. She became famous and Mon people [on Facebook] praised her for being brave enough to speak out. (Interview, November 2020)

It is important to note that the mediation of state social aid by political officials prior to the November 2020 election—which some supporters of minority parties labelled as political corruption—is unlikely to have influenced the outcome of the election. After all, the majoritarian nature of Myanmar's first-past-the-post electoral system ensured that the NLD, which won a plurality of the vote in the vast majority of seats, secured more than 80 per cent of seats in parliament.

Despite this, stories about corrupt dispersal of state pandemic social aid are important as they circulated within USDP, military and some ethnic minority social media pages in the weeks and months prior to the November 2020 election and in the period immediately prior to the coup. These stories framed the NLD government as exploiting its response to the pandemic to weaken its rivals and further strengthen its political position, despite the spike in COVID-19 infections in the months prior to the election (Strangio 2020). Examples of alleged biases in state social aid along with restrictions on minority party campaigning, while NLD chief ministers and members of parliament travelled widely to coordinate the pandemic response, helped feed a narrative among non-NLD supporters that led to calls for military intervention into the electoral process. Social media posts detailing the movements of NLD politicians amid COVID-19 circulated widely among pro-military, USDP and some minority party Facebook pages in mid to late 2020 and early 2021 (Author, digital fieldnotes 2020). Indeed, the decision by the NLD-appointed Union Election Commission (UEC) to host the election in November 2020, despite complaints from USDP and military representatives about pandemic restrictions on campaigning and canvassing with voters, was cited repeatedly by non-NLD supporters in the oral history interviews. As a candidate for a pro-USDP party in Yangon stated prior to the coup:

I believe that the government is biased toward the NLD party which is why we failed to implement effective campaigns ... I have heard stories of vote-buying by candidates but there isn't any plan to investigate the allegations ... the government together with the Union Election Commission did not listen to our voices [as minor parties] and conducted the election anyway. (Interview, December 2020)

For some non-NLD voters, the UEC's reluctance to investigate reports of vote-buying, along with irregularities during the election, were signs that the NLD was exploiting its incumbency to further strengthen its dominance while avoiding scrutiny. These concerns were echoed in complaints from ethnic Arakan political elites in October 2020 who viewed the UEC's decision not to run elections in the vast bulk of Rakhine State as the deliberate disenfranchisement of 1.5 million potential voters (Fishbein & Kyaw Hsan Hlaing 2020). These grievances, especially about the conduct of the election, were later cited by the military to justify its seizure of power in February 2021, and formed the basis for the junta's later charges of corruption and voter fraud against the NLD (Lee 2021). Though governance of the



pandemic, and especially state aid, was highly politicised in 2020, alongside these controversies non-state social actors played a significant, albeit less high-profile, role in leading grassroots response efforts across the country.

## **Non-state pandemic response efforts**

From the early days of the pandemic, the NLD government actively encouraged societal collaboration and partnerships in response efforts at both the national and local level. Political leaders encouraged diverse non-state actors to fill gaps in social welfare and public goods provision. In the weeks prior to the coup, the NLD government even established a fund for businesspeople and ordinary citizens to donate to Myanmar's efforts to procure vaccines (Zaw Zaw Htwe 2021).

Early in the pandemic, state officials encouraged township, neighbourhood and village welfare groups, charities, ethnic civil society groups, businesspeople and religious leaders to take on critical roles in the pandemic response at a sub-national level (Rhoads et al. 2020). These non-state networks assumed major roles in local response efforts, including quarantine, transport of patients, relief coordination, supplementation of service providers and enforcement of restrictions (Nay Yan Oo & Batcheler 2020). Armed groups and ethnic civil society groups coordinated with the Ministry of Health and Sport on public education and, later in 2020, vaccinations, building on ongoing collaboration over the five or so years prior (Si Thura & Schroeder 2018).

The leader of a social welfare group in a contested region of Karen State described being directly integrated into COVID-19 committee structures established by the government to coordinate response efforts across sectors:

During the first and second wave [in 2020] we worked with the township committee to stretch resources given by government to meet local needs for oxygen, food, transportation ... with support from General Administration Department [GAD] we also opened a health screening centre where general sickness were treated and those with more serious medical issues were referred to government public hospital ... the GAD office provided allowances to volunteers during second wave, 4500 MMK were given to the volunteers for 60 days as a food allowance. (Interview, January 2022)

Similar dynamics of collaboration between societal actors and the state were described at a village level in a ceasefire area of Mon State. As the leader of a village welfare group recounted of response efforts in 2020:

During the second wave [in mid-2020], the village COVID-19 committee included our *parabita* [social welfare] organisation and the local monk. Together we helped to raise funds and contribute oxygen canisters when the administrator's supply had run out. (Interview, February 2022)

These collaborative dynamics shifted markedly after February 2021 when the Myanmar military seized direct power once again. The coup, arrest of elected civilian leaders and subsequent brutal suppression of protests provoked an extraordinary civilian mobilisation against the dictatorship. It also ruptured the partnership between state and societal actors to manage the pandemic and extend state social aid through additional contributions and resource pooling at the community level. Since then, ordinary people have relied more than ever on non-state networks and practices of reciprocity, both to survive the economic collapse and the pandemic and to sustain resistance to the renewed dictatorship (Wittekind 2021). The following section examines these dynamics as they have developed in light of the February 2021 coup, identifying how the rupture of the pre-coup state–society pandemic response has been a crucial component of the junta's strategy to root out and discipline local administrative networks and social groups sympathetic to the NLD and democratic struggle more broadly.

## Post-coup management of COVID-19

Since February 2021, the SAC, led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, has used COVID-19 to wrest control over local administration and weaken networks it views as affiliated with the previous NLD government. Four key strategies have been deployed to discipline Myanmar's vibrant, non-state social sector: suppression of perceived dissent, empowerment of loyalists, disciplining of charitable actors and partnerships with neutral welfare groups. These strategies have markedly altered pre-coup patterns of state–society cooperation around the pandemic, likely worsening the mortality and socioeconomic impacts of the Delta wave of COVID-19 and prompting intense debate within Myanmar's charitable sector over the meaning of neutrality in the context of the new dictatorship.

## Suppression of dissent

Consistent with the junta's reliance on violence to maintain power and its refusal to tolerate dissent or negotiate with dissenters, since February 2021, military officials have engaged in the widespread suppression of non-state welfare groups perceived to be materially supporting the anti-junta resistance. This has fractured the national and sub-national health response that relied heavily on collaboration with societal actors and the public at large, particularly at a local level.

Immediately upon taking power, the junta arrested or suspended civil servants who had taken leading roles in the pandemic response, including coordinators of the national vaccination rollout that was just commencing in early 2021. In reaction to the coup, tens of thousands of medical staff at public facilities across the country walked off the job in an act of civil disobedience. Military personnel responded by harassing, coercing and, in some cases, directly attacking doctors and nurses, including some who had begun treating patients at charitable and private clinics or ambulance services that the junta viewed as aligned with the escalating protest movement (Dziedzic 2021). The Ministry of Health and Sport ultimately dismissed thousands of nurses, teachers and civil servants across ministries in response to their opposition to the coup, structurally undermining the already overstretched pandemic response.

Consistent with the broader boycott of government services and payment of taxes by the Civil Disobedience Movement, many patients also began to actively avoid government health facilities and resources following the coup (RFA 2021). This boycott became most obvious during the outbreak of the Delta wave of COVID-19 in mid-2021. Rather than seek care or supplies from state facilities, many patients and their family members instead sought treatment at charitable and private clinics, and attempted to procure oxygen canisters on the open market. In a context in which oxygen was already in short supply regionally due to the pandemic, junta officials attempted to counter the private procurement of breathing apparatuses and oxygen by centralising canister distribution through junta, USDP and military networks. Reports emerged of the forcible removal of oxygen canisters procured privately from critically ill COVID-19 patients, attracting domestic and international outrage (*Irrawaddy* 2021). These efforts were justifiably viewed by many in Myanmar as an attempt to weaponise the pandemic for

political gain by forcing ordinary people opposed to the new dictatorship to engage with the junta's structures and networks if they wanted their family members to survive.

The spread of COVID-19 during the Delta wave was likely exacerbated by the junta's attempts to suppress dissent and coerce patients and their families into relying on state resources. Many patients who contracted COVID-19 were forced to stay in state-led quarantine or isolation centres or were hospitalised at public facilities where, due to the strikes caused by the coup and shortages of medical supplies, many subsequently died. The military also raided charity and underground clinics that provided healthcare to patients, including those with COVID-19 (Esther J 2021).

The junta's Ministry of Health recorded 14,401 deaths in public facilities across the country during the peak of the Delta wave between July and September 2021; however, this excluded those who died at home or in private and charitable facilities (*Frontier Myanmar* 2022). Regional government and welfare group data on burials and cremations at Yangon's four main cemeteries provide a snapshot of the massive, unacknowledged death toll of COVID-19 in Myanmar following the coup. Their data, cited by *Frontier Myanmar* (2022), suggest that more than 30,000 people died in Yangon alone during the peak of the Delta wave.

The dire human consequences of the coup further eroded faith in the remaining staff at government health facilities, deepening popular grievances against the junta and reinvigorating the Civil Disobedience Movement in the second half of 2021. As the leader of a *parabita* (social welfare) group, which coordinated treatment for COVID-19 patients in a contested region of Myanmar throughout the Delta outbreak, explained: 'People do not trust [the staff] at government facilities so they just simply avoid getting their help' (Interview, January 2022).

## **Empowerment of junta loyalists**

Alongside junta attempts to coerce popular reliance on state networks has been the wholesale replacement of local governance and pandemic response teams with USDP and military loyalists. Across several contexts, including contested and ceasefire areas, welfare volunteers who had previously been members of village and township COVID-19 management committees in 2020 described being sidelined after the coup. Reflecting mutual distrust between regime loyalists and social actors previously involved in

collaborative local pandemic response, junta administrators formed new committees at village and township levels and filled these positions with people affiliated with the USDP or who they viewed as apolitical or unlikely to align themselves with democratic resistance efforts. As one interviewee explained:

We did some collaborative work with the [NLD] government previously, before the coup, and for that, they offered to donate some funds. However, for the work we have been doing after the coup, they [SAC administration] have never offered to work together or donate some money ... But a few other businesses in our group were contacted directly by the regime ... Maybe they [SAC officials] did not contact us because we currently chose to stay low profile and did not contact them. (Interview, January 2022)

The sidelining of local welfare groups involved in the COVID-19 response, and reliance instead on ostensibly neutral or loyalist businesspeople, broke the supplementary relationship between non-state charitable actors and government officials that had helped patch the significant gaps in resourcing throughout the first waves of COVID-19 in 2020.

The collapse of state–society trust as a result of the coup has been especially acute in contexts where junta administrators perceive monks to be supporting anti-coup resistance efforts; thus, local SAC COVID-19 committees have bypassed and sidelined local monastic networks. Fear of recrimination from the junta has also resulted in substantial declines in donations from wealthy businesspeople and private donors to local charitable efforts, as they are often unsure whether these groups are supporting the junta, opposing the coup or directly sustaining resistance efforts. As perceived support for resistance efforts can lead to the junta freezing bank accounts, boycotting businesses or arrest, some businesspeople have withdrawn from philanthropic efforts entirely in order to avoid such risks. Many *parahita* groups, meanwhile, have sought to prove that they are apolitical by regularly posting their charitable activities on Facebook as a means of appeasing their donors (Author notes, May 2022). Requiring local charitable actors to reframe their activities as ‘apolitical’ despite them directly supplementing for the social inaction of the state and responding to human insecurity created by its atrocities bears striking similarities to the depoliticisation of the *parahita* sector during the 1990s and 2000s (McCarthy 2016, 2023).

Dynamics of mutual distrust with local charitable and religious actors have also undermined the junta's attempted rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations. Several interviewees alleged that people loyal to the junta were the first to receive vaccinations in their communities. Others reportedly refused the vaccine, despite its availability, due to it being distributed by SAC representatives and because the Sinovax shot they were offered was viewed as inferior and riskier relative to other vaccines. Consequentially and worryingly, despite having regular and direct contact with COVID-19 patients, only a handful of the charity workers interviewed since the coup reported being fully vaccinated.

## Disciplining charitable actors

At the same time as seeking to control and redirect the pandemic response and resources through loyalists, and suppressing networks it sees as supporting resistance, the junta has also sought to selectively partner with, and strategically regulate, non-state social actors to advance the regime's objectives. The most direct way that the military has surveilled the *parahita* sector is by requiring groups and volunteers to be endorsed by junta officials and tightening control over where they source their funds.

Since the coup, military checkpoints have been set up in many cities, towns and on significant inter-town arteries to monitor the movement of people and goods, ostensibly for both pandemic and security purposes. In some cases, local *parahita* groups have been enlisted to help run these checkpoints (Author notes, May 2022). The military and state personnel manning these checkpoints require letters of recommendation from local SAC-affiliated administrators to permit volunteers to pass through. Without such documentation, volunteers are harassed and, in some cases, accused of supporting the democratic resistance. Social workers seeking to engage in charitable action in the post-coup context are, thus, forced to cultivate workable relationships with village or township SAC officials to solicit endorsement letters they can then show at checkpoints. In addition to forcing charitable workers to accede to the regulatory power of SAC authorities, these requirements also place the onus on volunteers to avoid actions that may be viewed by local administrators as in any way supporting the democratic resistance.

As well as tightening financial flows into the country to starve funding for anti-coup activities, the SAC has become more stringent about requiring formal registration of any welfare group—large or small, local or national—

with the junta before they can receive international funds. The Central Bank also restricts the flow of funds from large humanitarian organisations to small community organisations by requiring extensive documentation justifying each transfer. These new constraints build on earlier moves by the USDP and NLD administrations to regulate local civil society and any international financial support they may receive. In the post-coup context, if the leaders of a group are found to be receiving funds from abroad without registration, they risk being accused of being financial supporters of the People's Defence Forces or other local resistance efforts. Despite the severe socioeconomic situation created by both the pandemic and the coup, many groups that had relied on funds wired from diaspora networks abroad or international donors to local Myanmar bank accounts to support pandemic response efforts in 2020 have scaled back their activities since the return to military rule. The pastor of a village church in a contested region of Myanmar that had received funds in 2020 from international Christian networks to support COVID-19 relief explained that they had had to cut back their aid considerably as they had not been able to receive or withdraw their funds easily since the coup. The tightening of financial regulation around foreign charitable donations has only been compounded by the catastrophic financial sector crisis brought about by the coup (see Chapter 3, this volume). Though it is understood that some welfare groups have turned to informal financial transfer networks (*hundi*) to funnel money from abroad to support their efforts, this channel was not mentioned by any respondents interviewed for this project. However, it is clear that the operational barriers to *parabita* and civil society work within Myanmar have sparked a new exodus of people and organisations to Thailand and India since the coup, as well as a growing reliance on informal networks to transfer funds to local partners and beneficiaries (Author notes, May 2022).

## Strategic partnership

Within the larger context of the junta suppressing dissent and disciplining Myanmar's charitable sector, SAC officials have also sought to achieve their objectives by strategically partnering with, and resourcing, non-state social actors willing to accept a stringent notion of neutrality in the post-coup context. The clearest examples of such pragmatism are in contexts where local administrators and General Administration Department (GAD) staff have collaborated in the past with local social welfare groups or where the existence of ethnic armed organisations had led to a degree of flexibility about state engagement with diverse actors prior to the coup.

The closest relationship between SAC authorities and non-state social actors we encountered was in a contested area under mixed administration by an armed group and Myanmar government agencies. In this township, the *parahita* group reported receiving monthly stipends from the GAD township office during 2020 to support their role in COVID-19 treatment and transport. This cooperative relationship had continued beyond the coup. Volunteers shielded medical staff who did not join the Civil Disobedience Movement by guarding the local hospital from potential attacks by armed groups during the peak of the 2021 Delta wave. Members of the group also continued to be offered, and to accept, stipends from the GAD office for these efforts in mid-2021. Building on the role they played prior to the coup, these volunteers continued to act as mediators for patient transport between local armed groups, the People's Defence Forces and Myanmar's state army in 2021 and into 2022, much as non-state social actors such as churches have done in contested regions for decades.

The collaboration between charitable actors and local SAC officials appears to be highly contextual and seemingly dependent on pre-existing relationships developed between welfare volunteers and GAD officers stationed in the area prior to the coup. Numerous *parahita* groups that had played an active role in the pandemic response during 2020 reported being sidelined from local efforts in preference for loyalist local businesspeople. In a context of strict regulation of dissent and the tightening of state controls over non-state social actors, the willingness of some groups to engage with and directly endorse the junta has prompted intense debate within Myanmar civil society about the nature of humanitarian neutrality.

## Neutrality tensions

Several local welfare activists interviewed for this project criticised groups for engaging with the SAC, as doing so had the appearance of taking sides in the larger political conflict. The leader of an ambulance and funeral group active in the COVID-19 response argued that the cooption of welfare groups by SAC officials ran the risk of undermining the popular respect and ethical consistency that Myanmar's charitable sector relied upon to function:

I went to attend a government meeting in [the state capital] recently, and witnessed some of them had a very close relationship with the new [SAC] chief minister ... Personally, just leaning toward one authority is something I would never do. Because of these *parahita*



groups that are partnering with the military, other non-partisan *parahita* groups are also negatively viewed and judged by people. (Interview, January 2022)

In addition to navigating the SAC's tightening surveillance, welfare groups are thus faced with difficult trade-offs between principles and pragmatism—both personally and organisationally—in order to operate in the post-coup context. As the leader of a township-focused group that directly engaged with GAD officials to transport patients explained, at stake is a question of humanitarian neutrality:

For us it doesn't matter where the patients are coming from ... whether NUG [National Unity Government], [armed group] or military areas, we will do our best to support those who need our help ... we need to work with all authorities to get the work done. We take training from NUG online, review their COVID materials ... Sometimes, if there is some support the military government can provide, we need to work with them too. We cannot just take sides as the organisation. (Interview, January 2022)

However, organisational neutrality did not constrain some volunteers who engaged pragmatically with SAC officials during the peak of the Delta wave from expressing personal grievances about the coup. Several welfare volunteers, who otherwise maintained pragmatic and open relationships with GAD township administrators after the coup, claimed to have publicly advocated a return to democracy on social media, with no obvious ramifications for them or the organisations with which they worked (Interview, January 2022).

The notion of separating personal ethics from organisational neutrality in the context of dictatorship is highly contentious within Myanmar's charitable sector. As Myanmar activist Khin Omar (2021) argued post-coup:

Myanmar's humanitarian needs are overwhelming, but they cannot be met by engaging with the same perpetrators of the grave human rights abuses that relief aid intends to address ... there is nothing neutral about engaging with the military junta.

Amid broader discussions about whether and how the international community can deliver urgently needed humanitarian aid across Myanmar without directing it through the SAC (see Décobert, Chapter 12, this volume), post-coup debates about the neutrality—both organisational and personal—of Myanmar's non-state welfare sector raise thorny questions about the ethical and practical risks of partnering with local charitable actors

in townships where the SAC retains an administrative presence. Is it safe and feasible to partner with local non-state actors to disburse aid given the national context of rigid discipline within which such groups must operate? Or is the international community obliged to recognise and support the heroic work that many charitable groups are doing in the post-coup context rather than solely partnering with the junta?

The humanitarian agreement reached between the SAC and ASEAN in May 2022 suggests that regional neighbours are, for now, willing to partner with the SAC and the military in an attempt to distribute aid and relief as the post-coup humanitarian crisis intensifies (ASEAN 2022). The exclusion of the National Unity Government, ethnic armed organisations and local civil society in these dialogues and subsequent aid distribution risks compounding conflict in an already fractious political context. Given that the coercive developmental expansionism of Myanmar's state army into contested areas was stretching tenuous ceasefires to breaking point before the coup (McCarthy & Farrelly 2020), empowering the military to broker international aid will only enable the SAC to further discipline and neutralise its critics and depict itself domestically and internationally as a legitimate and compassionate authority. As Myanmar regional and international organisations argued in response to ASEAN's humanitarian partnership with the SAC in mid-2022, allowing the junta to 'weaponise humanitarian aid' is likely to result in the exclusion of many vulnerable people from urgently needed relief while implicating the regional bloc in the junta's ongoing atrocities (Progressive Voice 2022).

## Conclusion

The pandemic and its management via collaborative state–society relations in 2020 exacerbated pre-existing fractures in Myanmar's society and political system. Comparing state–society cooperation in relation to the pandemic in 2020 with the junta's suppression of NLD-affiliated charity groups and empowerment of ostensibly neutral social partners, this chapter has argued that the perceived weaponisation of the pandemic by successive state authorities highlights the marked political and sociological impact of COVID-19, both prior to and after the February 2021 coup.

Non-state social actors affiliated with the NLD have been suppressed and disempowered, fracturing the pandemic response and likely worsening mortality during the peak of the Delta wave in the second half of 2021.

Meanwhile, the charitable sector as a whole has been simultaneously disciplined and strategically coopted by SAC officials to help manage both the pandemic and the humanitarian crisis created by the coup. In some respects, this technique echoes the approach taken in the 1990s and 2000s by the previous dictatorship that suppressed overly political civil society groups and outsourced social functions to non-state social actors and businesspeople. The most recent wave of post-coup outsourcing is likely to similarly shape and distort welfare politics in Myanmar for years and decades to come (McCarthy 2023).

The urgent humanitarian crisis unfolding across Myanmar after the coup raises questions about the prospective role of Myanmar's vibrant non-state charitable sector in any substantive short-term response, especially in a context in which SAC administrators demand a degree of neutrality from *parahita* volunteers that many see as compromising both individual and organisational ethical integrity. ASEAN's initial agreement in May 2022 to partner with the junta on humanitarian aid comes with the risk that local welfare groups will be bypassed in flows of international support brokered and mediated by the Myanmar military despite their clear functional capacity to deliver urgent relief in the vexed political context.

In the medium term, the deepening of societal reliance on non-state social actors both to survive and resist dictatorship should compel strategic thinking about how a future civilian government can better address the precarity faced by ordinary people and put to rest the legacies of inequality bequeathed by past and current periods of dictatorship.

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