



# Exploring Civic Peacebuilding Space in Post-Coup Myanmar: Its Impact on Civil Society Peace Initiatives

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## Introduction

Across South and Southeast Asia, civil society actors play a pivotal role in peacebuilding processes to support their communities (Tuenpakdee & Darwish, 2023, p.4). However, global trends like rising authoritarianism and democratic backsliding have increasingly restricted civic space. This trend is particularly evident in South and Southeast Asia, where governments are imposing stricter limitations on freedom of speech, assembly, and civil liberties. These restrictions have rapidly shrunk civic space, undermining civil society's capacity to effectively carry out peacebuilding efforts. A regional analysis report by Solidar (2021) identified Cambodia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Pakistan, and Thailand as the countries where civic space is shrinking most severely. Among these, Myanmar stands out due to the unprecedented crackdown on civil liberties following the 2021 military coup. The military junta has imposed sweeping restrictions on freedom of expression, association, and peaceful assembly, further narrowing the space for civil society actors to operate. These constraints have disrupted peace initiatives, limiting their reach, and undermining their effectiveness. Given this context, it is vital to explore the current state of civic space in Myanmar to understand the challenges and opportunities for peacebuilding efforts in the post-coup environment. This blog aims to examine how post-coup dynamics in Myanmar have reshaped civic peacebuilding spaces, assess their impact on civil society's initiatives, and explore the adaptive strategies employed by civil society organizations (CSOs) to sustain their work under severe constraints.

## Overview of Myanmar's Civic Space Pre- and Post-Coup

### Defining Civic Space concerning Peacebuilding

Civic space refers to the physical or online environments where individuals or groups exercise fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, peaceful assembly, association, and access to information (Savage & Cocom, 2021). It serves as a platform for civil society actors to engage in initiatives that address social issues and promote community engagement. On the other hand, peacebuilding involves addressing the root causes of conflict and the structural inequalities that perpetuate it (Tuenpakdee & Darwish, 2023, p.4). Within the context of civic

space, civil society plays a crucial role in implementing peacebuilding initiatives, often called the "civic peacebuilding space". This intersection between civic space and peacebuilding highlights the importance of protecting it, as it forms the foundation for effective peacebuilding efforts and empowers civil society to drive positive change and promote long-term stability.

### ▪ **Pre-Coup Conditions**

Under Myanmar's military successive regimes, particularly from 1962 to 2011, civil society organizations (CSOs) were heavily restricted by oppressive laws. Despite these challenges, Kyaw Kyaw (2024) reported that CSOs, including informal religious groups, Parahita Aphwe Ase (social welfare organizations), and faith-based groups, played a crucial role in addressing social and political issues, often operating discreetly within Myanmar's complex socio-political landscape (p. 166). Although these groups were previously detached from politics, the political reforms of 2011 expanded civic and political spaces, creating new opportunities for CSOs to collaborate openly with government agencies on initiatives such as peacebuilding (Hnin Htet Htet Aung, 2023, p. 3). Between 2011 and 2020, CSOs became deeply integrated into Myanmar's political and civil life. This period, often referred to as "the rise of civil society," witnessed many political and rights activists establishing or joining CSOs (Kyaw Kyaw, 2024, p. 168). These organizations focused on capacity-building and empowering local communities through training, workshops, and awareness campaigns on peace, human rights, democracy, and environmental issues. During these transitional periods, civil society actors played a vital role in both formal peace processes and informal peacebuilding efforts at the community level to address long-running civil wars and local conflicts (JPF, 2019). Unfortunately, the 2021 military coup halted these peacebuilding efforts led by civil society.

### ▪ **Post-Coup Transformation**

On February 1, 2021, the Myanmar military staged a coup, overthrowing the civilian government under the pretext of alleged voter fraud in the 2020 elections. This event severely disrupted the country's fragile democratization process. In response, the general public and civil society launched resistance movements, ranging from peaceful protests to the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), aiming to reclaim civilian rule and restore democracy. As a result of their involvement in these movements, civil society organizations (CSOs) became targets of the State Administration Council (SAC) (International Center for Not-for-Profit Law [ICNL], 2022, p. 7). According to Pandita (2021), many CSO leaders have been arrested, detained, forced to flee the country, or hidden in safe houses. The report also highlights the immediate impacts of the military coup on CSOs, including disruptions in operations due to strict military security, escalating conflicts in project areas, and the risk of being blacklisted, dissolved, or arrested. This is due to the breakdown of the rule of law and increased scrutiny of financial flows for civic engagement, which has even led to unconditional freezes (Pandita, 2021, p. 15).

Despite the 2008 constitution granting freedom of association, assembly, and speech, which are all key elements of a thriving civil society, the 2021 military coup nullified these guarantees due to the lack of institutional checks and balances under military rule (Pandita, 2021, p. 9). The military junta's restrictions on freedom of association have led to constant threats against CSOs, particularly those focused on rights-based and advocacy work (Pandita, 2021, p. 8). In response, some CSOs have shifted to less politically sensitive activities, engaging with the SAC, while others have operated in exile or kept a low profile within Myanmar (ICNL, 2022, p. 7). Generally, the coup has significantly contributed to the shrinking of civic space in Myanmar. Compared to the pre-coup period, much of Myanmar's civil society progress has been destroyed in the post-coup environment. In the current situation, CSOs have struggled to survive and sustain their activities, whether operating inside Myanmar or in exile. This blog further explores the challenges faced by CSOs and the strategies they employ to continue their peacebuilding efforts, particularly those working in exile, amid the ongoing conflict and violence in Myanmar.

## **A case study of Myanmar's Civil Society Peace Initiatives and Their Challenges**

The post-coup environment in Myanmar has fuelled widespread conflict, deepening mistrust, and exacerbating social and political divides among communities. To promote social harmony amidst ongoing unrest, it is crucial to educate and empower communities to sustain stability and address small-scale conflicts within communities. Despite the junta's oppression of civil society organizations (CSOs), particularly those involved in political initiatives, CSOs remain vital to peacebuilding efforts. They adapt by utilizing online civic spaces, operating from exile, or maintaining a low profile within the restrictive post-coup Myanmar's political landscape. Even though peacebuilding CSOs are shifting their activities online, online civic space in Myanmar remains restricted due to government-imposed internet shutdowns and unstable electricity, hindering participants' engagement in online peacebuilding efforts. While both physical and online spaces face challenges, online platforms still provide an alternative for adapting to the repressive environment, albeit with limitations. This blog highlights the limitations faced by exile CSOs in conducting community peacebuilding initiatives online and examines the challenges and drawbacks of utilizing online civic spaces as an alternative in repressive regimes as follows.

### **Current Barriers and Challenges**

#### ***Limited Reach and Effectiveness***

Since the coup, CSO peacebuilding activities in Myanmar have shifted from physical civic spaces to online platforms. However, online spaces have limited reach to broader participants: security concerns restrict recruitment to existing networks, and political sensitivities prevent the broad dissemination of applications for peace initiatives to ensure the safety of participants

and organizations. Furthermore, conducting peacebuilding initiatives online through Zoom has somewhat impacted overall effectiveness due to the inherent limitations of virtual engagement. Overall, while online civic spaces provide an alternative in post-coup environment, limitations such as reach, and the effectiveness of online peace initiatives persist.

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*"We can't recruit participants beyond our existing network for our Community Peace Initiative programs due to security concerns for both our organization and participants. we conduct sessions online but virtual have limitations compared to in-person ones for speaking about effectiveness. We can't be sure of full engagement, and since participants are allowed to turn off their cameras for security reasons, it affects the overall effectiveness."*  
(FGD.1)

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### **Financial constraints and security Concerns**

Furthermore, CSOs running peace initiatives online from exile or remotely still face financial constraints due to the junta's securitization and restrictions on financial transactions. Since participants are in Myanmar, allowances must often be transferred through Myanmar Bank accounts like KBZ Pay, keeping financial flows tied to Myanmar's banking system. This dependency exposes CSOs to financial security threats, a deliberate tactic by the Junta to suppress their activities. Beyond financial security threats or constraints, this situation also creates a security threat for staff who are currently inside because the address linked to the bank account is accessible.

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*"Recently, ----our staff's K-Pay account was restricted due to high transaction volumes for participant allowances. The bank cited laws on financial fraud and black money, creating both financial and security risks for our staff. Our staff had to relocate for safety because the address linked to the bank account is accessible and we also concern safety if junta target our staff with various oppressive law"* (FGD.3)

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### **Digital divide**

Online civic spaces provide an alternative for community peacebuilding initiatives in politically sensitive contexts like Myanmar, where physical space for political initiatives is restricted. However, meaningful engagement in these spaces requires digital skills, which are often lacking at the community level. This gap hinders the ability of civil society organizations (CSOs) and local communities to fully utilize digital tools for online peacebuilding activities and sharing knowledge back to their community.

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*"We deliver the Community Peace Initiatives program online, but many participants struggle with digital tools needed for virtual training. Our capacity to teach these skills is limited, as most community members are only familiar with basic platforms like Zoom. When implementing peacebuilding projects with small grants, they face challenges using tools like even Google Drive and others. Teaching digital skills is important since we run everything online, but we need support to make this happen."*  
(FGD.2)

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### ▪ Strengthening online civic peacebuilding space

The ongoing political crisis and nationwide conflicts in Myanmar make it nearly impossible for civil society organizations (CSOs) to utilize physical civic spaces, especially for political initiatives under the military junta. As a result, many CSOs have turned to online civic spaces for peacebuilding efforts. While online spaces provide an alternative for continuing peace initiatives amidst the crises, they also face several challenges, including internet shutdowns and unstable electricity, limited reach and effectiveness, financial constraints, security concerns, and digital divides. Some of these challenges are beyond our control, but others can be addressed to strengthen online civic spaces in the long term, especially if physical spaces remain inaccessible due to the ongoing crisis. This blog emphasizes the importance of bridging digital divides and enhancing digital skills to improve the effectiveness of peacebuilding efforts in online civic spaces. Strengthening these spaces requires collaboration between international organizations, local CSOs, and NGOs to build digital skills through capacity-building training. With international solidarity and local efforts, we can create meaningful engagement in online civic peacebuilding spaces, enabling the effective participation of local communities to mitigate conflict and maintain stability and peace amid Myanmar's ongoing political crisis.

## Conclusion

The shrinking of civic space in post-coup Myanmar has severely disrupted peacebuilding efforts, forcing civil society organizations (CSOs) to adapt to a repressive environment. The shift from physical to online civic spaces has enabled some peace initiatives to continue, but these efforts face significant challenges, including limited reach and effectiveness, digital divides, financial constraints, and security threats. Thus, strengthening online civic spaces is crucial for sustaining peacebuilding activities in the absence of accessible physical spaces amid Myanmar's political crisis. This requires concerted efforts from international organizations and local CSOs and NGOs to enhance digital skills and build capacity to empower local communities. By building digital resilience and leveraging global solidarity, Myanmar's civil

society can sustain peacebuilding efforts in online civic spaces, even under the junta's oppressive rule.

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