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Political Constraints and Youth Participation in Civil Society Organizations after Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup: A Case Study of Mon State

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Abstract

The 2021 military coup marked Myanmar's most significant political rupture since 2010, transforming its civic and political landscape. Youths emerged at the forefront of protests and resistance, while simultaneously becoming the primary targets of repression. Alongside this, Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) mobilized to deliver essential services, ranging from education and healthcare to disaster relief and humanitarian aid despite mounting restrictions. This study investigates the centrality of youth participation in CSOs and its implications for community development in Mon State. Employing a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews with seven participants reveal that bureaucratic barriers, the enforcement of military conscription, and widespread curtailment of freedoms have severely undermined youth engagement. Consequently, CSOs faced declining public trust, reduced effectiveness in awareness campaigns, weakened program implementation, and in some cases, forced relocation. The findings demonstrate that post-coup political constraints have not only narrowed the space for youth activism but also impaired CSO capacity to sustain community-oriented initiatives. The study concludes by advancing recommendations aimed at strengthening youth involvement and reinforcing the resilience of CSOs under authoritarian conditions.

Introduction

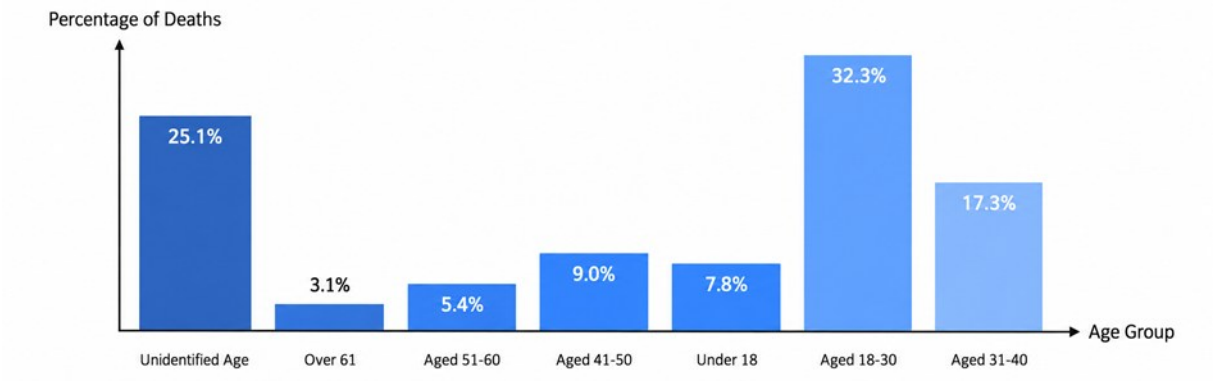
Myanmar has been officially ruled by the military since 1958 (Gartner, 2017). After a short period of being a democratic state (2011-2020), the military reclaimed power by detaining the elected government officials in February 2021. General Min Aung Hlaing took the authority of Myanmar under the 2008 constitution which gives favor to the military as it was made by the military (Paddock, 2022). Therefore, due to the complex case and relation with the military, Myanmar was selected as a case study since the country was under military rule for nearly 70 years. The long history under military control and its citizen relationships need thorough emphasis.

Since the coup began, at least 6,337 civilians have been killed and more than 3.3 million have been displaced in just between 2021 and 2022 (United Nations, 2024; Relief Web, 2023). Additionally, 27,400 people have been arrested according to the United Nations (2024). Among the casualties, the 18-30 age group accounted for the highest number, with 558 deaths, equivalent to 31 percent of the total (Institute for Strategy and Policy-Myanmar, 2022).

Given their active engagement in the pro-democracy movement, this study focuses on the youths between 18 to 30 years old as they were severely affected by the military coup. The diagram below shows the ratio of citizens killed by the military in Myanmar between 2021 and 2022 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

The age of citizens killed by the military between 2021 and 2022



Source: Adapted from "Over 2,300 Civilians Killed Within a Year of the Coup", by Institute for Strategy and Policy Myanmar, 2022 (https://ispmyanmar.com/over-2300-civilians-killed-within-a-year-of-the coup/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

The Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) have been key actors in Myanmar's developmental process since before the coup, as they deliver humanitarian aid and support community needs by partnering with local and international organizations (Partnership for Transparency, 2025). However, due to the military coup in Myanmar in 2021, the participation of youths in CSOs was threatened socially, economically and politically. This research addresses how the political constraints created by the 2021 military coup have shaped youths' participation in CSOs. Moreover, CSOs have been closely monitored by the military since they do not want CSOs to support the revolution (International Center for Not For Profit Law, 2025).

This study focuses on civil society organizations (CSOs) in Mon State due to its distinct institutional, geographical, and demographic characteristics. CSOs in Mon State have been actively engaged in community-based initiatives through collaboration with the Mon State Youth Affairs Committee, which operates under Myanmar's Youth Policy (The Union of the Republic of Myanmar, 2017), providing an important context for examining youth participation within semi-institutionalized civic structures. Geographically, Mon State's proximity to the Thai–Myanmar border positions it as a strategic hub for CSOs and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) involved in cross-border activities and international funding networks. Moreover, compared to major urban centers such as Yangon and Mandalay, CSOs in Mon State remain relatively understudied. Demographically, the state's notably young population, with a median age of 25, makes it a particularly relevant site for analyzing youth engagement in civil society (Department of Population, Ministry of Labor, Immigration and Population, 2017).

Research Objectives

1. To examine the political constraints affecting youth participation in civil society organizations (CSOs) in Mon State following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar.

2. To identify the consequences faced by civil society organizations (CSOs) in Mon State because of limited youth participation in the post-coup period.

Literature Review

1. Political Constraints on Youths' Participation in Civil Society Organizations

1.1 Global Context

Youth participation in CSOs is primarily shaped by two political constraints: legal policy restrictions and the presence of an authoritarian regime.

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First, the legal policy framework of a state often limits the capacity of youth to engage in CSOs and youth-led initiatives. Abdou and Skalli (2014) illustrate this by noting that Egyptian legal frameworks grant the government the power to approve or reject foreign aid to CSOs, thus creating a significant legal limitation. Furthermore, Buyse (2018) argues that the anti-NGOs policies and laws in the country limit youth participation in CSOs, citing the requirement since 2012 for any foreign-funded CSOs in Russia engaged in political activity to register as "foreign agents."

Furthermore, authoritarian regimes tend to impose significant limitations on youth participation in civil society organizations (CSOs). According to Eckhardt (1991), authoritarianism refers to a political system designed primarily to serve the interests of those in power, typically operating through rigid hierarchical structures in which directives from the ruling authority are followed unquestioningly. Likewise, Bee (2019) argued that the authoritarian regime in Turkey, under the Justice and Development Party (AKP), restricted youth participation by cultivating a pervasive fear of repression, constraining freedom of expression, and exerting tight control over CSOs. In addition, youth empowerment programs were often subject to political criticism and manipulation under the regime's authority. Similarly, in Egypt's post-2011 period, authoritarian governance also curtailed youth involvement in CSOs. The regime introduced restrictive legal frameworks, including Law No. 149 of 2019 and Law No. 218 of 2017, both of which limited youth engagement and CSO activities (Marzouk, 2023).

1.2 Myanmar Context

Two major political limitations have hindered youth participation in civil society organizations (CSOs) in Myanmar: the constitutional barriers established by the military drafted 2008 Constitution and the absence of state policies that promote youth activism. The constitutional framework has long constrained civic engagement, even before the 2021 military coup. As Barter (2024) observes, the 2008 Constitution institutionalized restrictions on freedom of assembly by requiring citizens particularly young people to obtain prior government approval before organizing public protests or gatherings. Such legal provisions have significantly curtailed youth involvement in civic life. Moreover, the Constitution fails to ensure youth representation in political decision-making processes, thereby excluding younger voices from governance structures. Likewise, Bawana (2021) contends that the same constitutional arrangements restrict youth activism within CSOs by limiting freedom of expression. The framework further imposes administrative and legal barriers that obstruct the formation of youth-led organizations, discouraging grassroots initiatives and diminishing broader civic participation.

In addition to these structural constraints, the absence of policy measures supporting youth engagement constitutes a further limitation. Vrieze (2022) notes that youth participation in Myanmar's CSOs is profoundly shaped by the country's volatile political and conflict dynamics. Under such conditions, young people face severe restrictions on civic involvement, as participation in youth-led initiatives especially in urban areas has been curtailed by the threat of arrest and intimidation. Similarly, Ring et al. (2020) highlight that existing government policies systematically exclude unregistered youth organizations from formal consultation processes. Instead, state authorities privilege registered CSOs in policy formulation and implementation, thereby marginalizing independent youth movements and undermining pluralism within civil society.

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2. Consequences Faced by Civil Society Organizations Due to Limited Youth Participation

2.1 Global Context

The decline in youth participation has created two major challenges for civil society organizations (CSOs): reduced outreach to grassroots communities and a loss of human resource capacity. First, limited youth engagement diminishes CSOs' ability to connect with local communities. Mpagi (2022) notes that youth absence weakens the communication link between organizations and the public, while Mudimu (2017) observes that in South Africa, public trust declines when CSOs lack youth representation, leading to reduced participation in community programs.

Second, the shortage of young members erodes human resource capacity and innovation within CSOs. Antlöv et al. (2008) highlight that in Indonesia, limited youth involvement fosters aging leadership, weakens advocacy networks, and constrains organizational resilience. Consequently, CSOs struggle to adapt to evolving social needs and maintain relevance among younger populations.

Collectively, these dynamics reveal that declining youth engagement undermines both the operational effectiveness and democratic legitimacy of civil society organizations.

2.2 Myanmar Context

The limited participation of youths in Myanmar's civil society organizations (CSOs) has generated two primary consequences: the irrelevance of programs and weakened organizational resilience. The first consequence—the lack of program relevance has become a critical challenge for CSOs, as initiatives that fail to integrate youth perspectives often misalign with community needs. Hald and Smith (2018) emphasize that the inclusion of youth voices is essential to ensure that CSO programs remain responsive and contextually appropriate.

Furthermore, the absence of young members undermines the resilience of CSOs, reducing their capacity to adapt and sustain operations amid political instability. As CSOs in Myanmar largely depend on volunteers, political constraints affecting youth participation have caused fluctuations in workforce stability and organizational continuity. Consequently, many CSOs have struggled to maintain effective community engagement. Jagger (2018) similarly argues that CSOs operating in conflict-affected areas become increasingly fragile without adaptive and innovative approaches to sustain resilience under volatile conditions.

3. Political Opportunity Structure Theory

This study is grounded in Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theory, which provides a useful framework for understanding how political events create opportunities for, or impose constraints on, civil society movements. The theory is particularly applicable to this research because the 2021 military coup fundamentally transformed the political environment in Myanmar, reshaping the conditions under which civil society operates. The coup significantly narrowed political opportunities by intensifying state repression, especially toward youth groups and civil society organizations (CSOs). As a result, forms of civic engagement that previously functioned within semi-open political spaces have increasingly been constrained, suppressed, or criminalized. Applying Political Opportunity Structure theory therefore enables this study to systematically analyze how the post-coup political context has altered patterns of youth participation and civil society mobilization under conditions of authoritarian repression.

Rootes (1999) defines Political Opportunity Structure (POS) theory as an analytical approach that explains how opportunities and constraints for social movements are shaped by external

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political factors and institutional contexts. Central to this framework is the argument that the degree of openness or closure within a political system significantly influences political actors by determining the extent to which participation, dissent, and collective action are tolerated or repressed. Political systems that are more open tend to accommodate civic engagement and institutionalized participation, whereas closed systems restrict political access and limit channels for lawful dissent.

Building on this perspective, Gleditsch and Ruggeri (2010) identify political opportunity structure as a useful framework for analyzing how political environments condition the emergence and dynamics of social movements and collective action, particularly protests. They suggest that open political systems are more likely to facilitate social change by allowing citizens to engage freely in political participation, including protest activities. In contrast, autocratic regimes are characterized by political repression and constrained civic space, which may contribute to heightened social tensions and, in some cases, protests or violent conflict due to the coercive nature of political institutions.

Similarly, Kitschelt (2009) conceptualizes political opportunity structures in terms of the openness or closure of political systems that shape the strategic choices of social movements. In relatively open systems, political actors are more inclined to pursue institutionalized forms of participation, such as electoral engagement or compliance with formal rules. Conversely, closed or unresponsive political systems tend to encourage non-institutional strategies, including protest, civil disobedience, or, in extreme cases, violence.

Within the existing literature, POS theory has been widely applied to examine civil society dynamics under authoritarian rule. In contexts marked by military domination and coercive governance, scholars note that restrictive political environments systematically narrow opportunities for civic participation, particularly for youth and civil society organizations (CSOs). The introduction of policies such as mandatory military service has been discussed in the literature as an illustration of political closure, reinforcing patterns of repression that limit civic engagement and reshape modes of collective action. As such, POS theory provides a valuable conceptual lens for synthesizing scholarly debates on the relationship between political repression, youth participation, and civil society activity in authoritarian settings such as Myanmar.

Research Methods

The study involved seven participants drawn from four distinct groups: youths working in CSOs (n = 3), random youths not employed in CSOs (n = 2), CSO leaders (n = 1), and government officials (n = 1). A qualitative approach was employed using one-on-one, in-depth semi-structured interviews. Each interview comprised ten core questions and two to three follow-up questions where further clarification was required.

Purposive sampling was applied to ensure that participants possessed relevant knowledge and experience within the study context. Interviews were conducted online in Burmese and later transcribed into English by the researcher. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data. Following transcription, the researcher performed coding by identifying key ideas and grouping them into themes such as documentation, military conscription law, and restrictions on freedom.

To complement the primary data, secondary data sources such as government reports, international organization publications, and prior academic research were also reviewed. These materials provided contextual understanding of Myanmar's political environment and supported the triangulation of findings.

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To enhance credibility, participants were invited to review and confirm the accuracy of the findings (member checking). This process ensured that interpretations accurately reflected participants' intended meanings. The interviews provided valuable insights into the sources of insecurity experienced by youths and the underlying reasons for their reluctance to engage in CSOs in Mon State after the 2021 military coup. To ensure participant confidentiality and comply with research ethics, all personal identifiers were removed from the data. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, labeled from A to G, corresponding to their respective interview group. These alphabetical codes were used consistently throughout transcription, analysis, and reporting to prevent any direct or indirect identification. Only the researcher had access to the raw interview data, and all files were securely stored in encrypted digital form. Participant information is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

List of participants

No.	Participant Name	Research Group	Working Experience	Organization	Age
1	A	CSOs youths	3 years	Mon state CSO	27
2	B	CSOs youths	3 years	Mon state CSO	24
3	C	CSOs youths	6 years	Mon state CSO	30
4	D	Government Official	10 years	Government Institution	52
5	E	CSOs leader	10 years	Mon state CSO	29
6	F	Random youth	-	Family Business	22
7	G	Random youth	-	Student	22

Results

1. The Political Constraints Limiting Youth Participation in Mon State CSOs after the 2021 Military Coup

1.1 Documentation Problems

Youths in Mon State encounter three major documentation-related challenges that restrict their participation in civil society organizations (CSOs): guest registration, travel documentation requirements imposed by military authorities, and the re-registration of organizations under the post-coup military government.

The first issue concerns guest registration. According to existing regulations, visitors who are not listed as household members must register with the township authorities for temporary residence. This policy significantly affects youth involvement in CSOs by restricting their ability to stay at organizational offices or training camps. Participants from both the youth working group (Participant A) and the CSO leadership group (Participant E) identified guest registration as a major barrier to project implementation.

Participant A explained that excessive documentation procedures reduced the efficiency of vocational school programs and heightened security concerns among young participants.

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Under the military government's rules, guest registration must be renewed monthly for youths attending these programs, creating persistent risks of arrest and intimidation.

1.2 Travel and Organizational Registration Issues

The second documentation challenge involves the requirement for travel approval when citizens move between townships, as mandated by the military authorities. Participants F (random youth), B (youth working in a CSO), and E (CSO leader) identified these restrictions as major obstacles. They reported numerous military checkpoints where soldiers inspect vehicles and require travelers to present approval letters issued by township authorities before allowing entry into another township. According to the participants, youths must obtain official approval letters for almost all activities, particularly when gathering in groups of more than five people. These restrictions have severely limited youth participation in CSO activities, as mobility is closely monitored. When vehicles are stopped, young people are subjected to more rigorous questioning, phone inspections, and, in some cases, arbitrary arrests.

The third issue concerns the registration of CSOs under the military government. Participants A and E, both involved in CSOs promoting LGBT+ rights, explained that unregistered organizations face major difficulties in maintaining operations. Because their organization refused to register with the military administration, they must avoid collaboration with government officials. As a result, engagement with local youth communities—particularly in vocational training programs—has significantly declined due to the inability to operate freely in either governmental or community spaces.

However, participant F noted that local authorities in Mon State occasionally encourage youth participation in specific community activities, such as fundraising efforts during the Myanmar earthquake in 2025, suggesting that restrictions may be less stringent compared to other regions. Meanwhile, participant D, a government official, justified the guest registration and travel approval systems as necessary security measures intended to maintain township safety and prevent potential threats.

1.3 Military Conscription Law

Two major issues related to the military conscription law have significantly affected youth participation in civil society organizations (CSOs): youth migration abroad and the fear of forced recruitment by the military. Participants A, B, C, and E—all youths working in CSOs— explained that since the enforcement of the conscription law, many young people in Mon State and across Myanmar have prioritized emigration over civic engagement. The law obliges citizens to serve in the military, placing heavy pressure on the youth population and prompting many potential contributors to CSOs to leave the country in search of safety and stability.

The second concern involves the widespread fear of abduction by military soldiers. Participant E described how young people are subject to constant surveillance, interrogation, and restrictions on public gatherings, which further discourage civic participation. LGBT+ youth face heightened vulnerability under these political and social conditions. Participants noted that many young people in Mon State fear being forcibly conscripted to support ongoing military operations in the civil conflict. Participant F also confirmed that this fear prevents youths from leaving their homes or engaging in community activities.

Conversely, participants A and F emphasized that Mon State—especially the capital city,

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Mawlamyine—is relatively safer compared to other regions. Participant D, a senior government official from the Ministry of Education in Mon State, asserted that national defense is a collective responsibility of both citizens and soldiers, and therefore, military service is a civic duty. The participant further noted that individuals formerly associated with the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) or the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) are invited to join humanitarian programs supported by the military government, rather than being subjected to forced conscription.

1.4 Restrictions on Freedom

Three main restrictions on the freedoms of youths in Mon State were identified: freedom of assembly, freedom of mobility, and freedom of speech and expression. The first restriction affecting youth participation in CSOs is the limitation on freedom of assembly. All participants from the three youth groups (A, E, and F) agreed that the lack of freedom of assembly has led to a decline in youth participation in CSOs in Mon State. Young people are required to complete documentation procedures with township authorities if they wish to gather in groups of more than five people.

Another restriction concerns the limitation on freedom of mobility. Participants A, B, C, E, and F expressed that restrictions on movement hinder youth participation in CSOs. Moreover, participants A, B, E, and F agreed that the requirement for unnecessary documentation—such as approval letters from township authorities to travel between townships—further limits mobility and discourages youth engagement in CSO activities.

Lastly, restrictions on freedom of speech and expression also constrain youth participation. All participants, except those from the government officials' group, stated that limitations on freedom of speech and expression discourage young people from engaging in CSO work. Participant B explained that they are not allowed to carry project-related materials while traveling or to show their work to the authorities, which reduces transparency and participation.

Conversely, Participant D mentioned that members of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), youths, People's Defense Forces (PDF), and political activists are allowed to approach local security officers to access healthcare, education, and necessities at government-supported camps. Furthermore, the military government has made efforts to improve youth education by allowing students to retake examinations that were disrupted by natural disasters such as the recent earthquake.

2. Consequences that Mon State CSOs are Facing Due to Limited Youth Participation After the 2021 Military Coup in Myanmar

There are two main factors contributing to the limitations of public trust toward CSOs: fear of security and the absence of trusted youth representatives within the organizations. The first factor limiting public trust in CSOs is the fear of security. Participants A, C, and E shared similar views that the public's concern for safety discourages engagement with CSOs, resulting in reduced participation in project implementation and community activities.

The second factor relates to the lack of trusted individuals within the organizations. Participants C and F emphasized that public trust tends to increase when residents personally know someone working in a CSO. Participant F, from the random youth group, expressed that she usually trusts a CSO only if it employs someone she personally knows.

2.1 Difficulties in Spreading Awareness

Three main conditions hinder the dissemination of public awareness: limitations on on-ground activities, lack of freedom of expression, and

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limited connections with government sectors. The first condition involves restrictions on conducting on-ground activities. All participants from the youth groups working in CSOs and the CSO leaders' group (A, B, C, and E) stated that their organizations face significant challenges in implementing community-based programs due to ongoing security concerns.

The second condition is the lack of freedom of expression within the CSOs, which has resulted in limited public awareness. Participants A and E shared similar experiences, noting that their organizations are forced to operate in a low-profile manner. As a result, public engagement is minimal, and their activities are confined to knowledge sharing and health support within their immediate communities.

The third condition concerns the limited collaboration between CSOs and government institutions. Participants A and C explained that, before the coup, their organizations could easily partner with government agencies to carry out programs. However, following the rise of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and the departure of skilled government staff, cooperation has become nearly impossible. Moreover, since their organizations are not registered under the military administration, formal partnerships with governmental institutions are now prohibited.

Limited youth engagement in the programs initiated by the CSOs happens due to two factors, namely survival risk and the military conscription law. All the participants from random youths' groups, F and G, CSO leader participant E, talked about the survival risk as the most challenging factor for them to work at CSOs. For participant G, the main reason that limits the participant from engaging with the CSOs is that having the fear of being arrested, tortured, or their family being at risk due to involvement. Another factor constraining youth engagement in CSO programs is the implementation of the military conscription law. Participant A argued that as soon as the conscription law was passed, they had to send all the students who were attending on campus to their native land.

2.2 Relocation of Operational Offices

The two main factors contributing to this consequence are excessive documentation requirements and the lack of support from township authorities in operational processes.

The first factor concerns the overdocumentation issue, as CSOs are required to complete extensive registration procedures under the military government. Participants A, C, and E reported facing similar challenges related to the excessive paperwork demanded by the authorities. They also expressed their unwillingness to operate under military oversight. Participant A shared that their organization lost its school venue due to mandatory military service policies and had to relocate to the border area. Consequently, they can no longer operate within Mon State townships because of heightened security risks, leading them to shift their program delivery to virtual platforms for youths in Mon State. Participant C added that, prior to the military coup, CSOs had greater freedom of movement and were able to conduct on-ground activities more freely.

The second factor involves a lack of support from township authorities. All youth participants from the three interview groups (A, B, C, E, F, and G) agreed that CSOs now face significant communication barriers with local officials. Participant A explained that, before the coup, cooperation with local authorities was straightforward; however, since the coup, collaboration has become nearly impossible, hindering the implementation of joint programs and initiatives.

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Discussion

1. The Political Constraints in Myanmar After the 2021 Military Coup Limiting Youth Participation in Civil Society Organizations in Mon State

This study identifies three major political constraints that have limited youth participation in CSO-related work in Mon State: (1) documentation problems, (2) the mandatory military conscription law, and (3) restrictions on freedom.

The first major issue is the documentation barriers faced by youths engaged in CSO activities. Participants A, B, C, E, and F stated that youths must undergo documentation procedures to travel between townships. Even with complete documentation, their security is not guaranteed, as soldiers at checkpoints can inspect vehicles and personal belongings at will. Moreover, the unregistered status of certain CSOs has hindered project implementation and increased security risks for youths working within these organizations. These findings are consistent with the conceptualization of political opportunity structure theory articulated by Gleditsch and Ruggeri (2010), which emphasizes how political environments condition the emergence, scope, and sustainability of social movements and collective action. In the present context, the military government has systematically narrowed political opportunities by obstructing civil society organization (CSO) registration procedures and restricting access to travel documentation for young people. Such institutional constraints have significantly limited youths' ability to participate in civil society activities, thereby reducing both the organizational capacity and mobilization potential of youth-led movements. According to Barter (2024), the root cause of these challenges lies in the 2008 Constitution, which restricts the right to freely assemble and engage in collective activities. This constitutional framework limits freedom of expression, thereby reducing youth participation. Similarly, Abdou and Skalli (2014) found that in Egypt, many youths lost interest in joining CSOs due to excessive government reporting requirements. They further argued that governments hold discretionary power to approve or reject youth-led CSO initiatives, thereby curtailing civic engagement.

Participant G explained that one reason for avoiding CSO involvement is the threat of intimidation by the military government. Ordinary youths in Myanmar already face frequent inspections while traveling; those working in politically active CSOs encounter even stricter restrictions. When CSOs attempt to organize on-ground activities, such as fundraising or community work, they must first obtain letters of approval from township authorities. Participant E shared that during fundraising efforts for earthquake relief in March 2025, youths in Mon State were required to secure such approval letters to avoid being accused of supporting the People's Defense Forces (PDF), which are viewed by the military as revolutionary groups. The findings further reflect the political opportunity structure perspective advanced by Gleditsch and Ruggeri (2010), which posits that the scope, form, and constraints of social movements are fundamentally shaped by the degree of openness or closure within the political system. In this case, the systematic closure of political opportunities has curtailed institutionalized channels of participation, while concurrently fostering the emergence of protests and, in some instances, violent resistance as alternative forms of collective action. This shift underscores how restrictive political environments may unintentionally redirect civic engagement from formal participation toward more confrontational modes of mobilization.

As Bawana (2021) noted, these restrictions originate from the 2008 Constitution, which mandates government approval for any public gathering of more than five people.

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The second major constraint arises from the military conscription law, which discourages youth participation in CSO activities. Participants A, C, E, F, and G all identified the conscription law as a key factor reducing youth engagement. The law pressures young people to serve in the military, causing both CSO workers and youth beneficiaries to withdraw from participation. Participant A recounted that their organization's school had to send students back to their families, halting in-person education. Many youths also fear abduction by soldiers, particularly at night. Following the law's enactment, youth security in Mon State became a critical concern. The findings are consistent with the political opportunity structure theory articulated by Rootes (1999), which argues that political and institutional contexts fundamentally shape the opportunities and constraints faced by social movements. Following the enactment of the military conscription law, institutional changes altered the political environment in ways that significantly influenced young people's engagement, redirecting their participation toward civil society organizations and security-related activities. Vrieze (2022) observed that Myanmar's unstable political landscape severely limits youth participation in civic initiatives and political representation.

Comparable international experiences highlight similar patterns. Buyse (2018) noted that Russia's anti-CSO legislation of 2012 labeled organizations receiving foreign funding as "foreign agents," discouraging civic activism. In Egypt, Marzouk (2023) explained that post 2011 authoritarian laws—specifically Law No. 149 of 2019 and Law No. 218 of 2017— restricted youth engagement in CSOs and curtailed freedom of expression.

The third major issue is the restriction on fundamental freedoms, including freedom of mobility, speech and expression and assembly. All participants (A, B, C, E, and F) reported that military checkpoints have severely restricted mobility, with soldiers inspecting electronic devices, vehicles, and personal data without prior notice. Freedom of speech and expression has likewise been suppressed, as youths fear reprisals for voicing opinions on social or political issues. Those working in unregistered CSOs must maintain a low or no profile on social media to avoid arrest. This finding resonates with Kitschelt's (2009) articulation of political opportunity structure theory, which emphasizes that variations in political openness and closure significantly shape the trajectories and strategies of social movements. In this context, the military's consolidation of power and heightened control over civil society organizations (CSOs) has produced a closed political opportunity structure, thereby constraining overt forms of youth participation. As a result, young activists have been compelled to adopt low-profile modes of operation as a strategic response to heightened repression and surveillance. Barter (2024) also emphasized that the 2008 military-drafted Constitution limits freedom of assembly by requiring government approval for protests or public gatherings. Similarly, Bee (2019) observed that during the AKP regime in Turkey, authoritarian restrictions on freedom mirrored those seen in Myanmar.

All these constraints are interrelated. The 2021 military coup fundamentally altered Myanmar's political landscape, giving rise to multiple, overlapping barriers to youth engagement in CSOs. Youths fear arrest, torture, and persecution, leaving them with minimal space for civic involvement. Participants A, C, E, and F noted that before the coup, travel documentation was unnecessary, but after the coup, strict controls were imposed. The conscription law, enacted after the coup, poses the gravest threat, as youths can be abducted even during the daytime.

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Restrictions on freedom have also intensified, with the military suppressing fundamental rights and liberties. Therefore, the interrelated political constraints—documentation barriers, conscription law, and restrictions on freedom—stem directly from the military government established after the 2021 coup, collectively limiting youth participation in CSOs.

2. The Consequences on Mon State CSOs Due to Limited Youth Participation

This study identifies four main consequences faced by Mon State CSOs because of limited youth participation: (1) difficulties in spreading awareness, (2) reduced youth engagement in CSO-initiated programs, (3) relocation of operational offices, and (4) a decline in public trust.

The first consequence is that CSOs face difficulties in spreading awareness to the public. Participant C explained that organizations can communicate more effectively with local communities when they include youth representatives from those areas. However, many villages reject CSO initiatives due to fear of the military government. In addition, the security threats faced by youths particularly while traveling have reduced the number of young people available for on-ground projects, further limiting public outreach. Participants A, B, C, E, and G stated that their organizations are restricted in fulfilling their missions and visions because they must prioritize the safety of their members. The findings align with political opportunity theory as articulated by Gleditsch and Ruggeri (2010), which posits that the degree of openness within a political system conditions the capacity of social movements to mobilize, enabling protest and collective action in open systems while facilitating repression under autocratic rule. In this context, civil society organizations (CSOs) operated under an increasingly autocratic regime that restricted their outreach activities, thereby constraining organizational effectiveness and undermining their ability to fulfill institutional missions. Bawana (2021) noted that Myanmar's 2008 Constitution restricts youths from conducting on-ground activities, reducing their engagement with rural communities and limiting awareness efforts. Similarly, Mudimu (2017) found that in South Africa, CSOs struggle to connect with grassroots communities when youth representation is lacking.

This outcome is linked to three political constraints: restrictions on freedom, documentation problems, and the military conscription law. Limitations on freedom of assembly, mobility, and expression reduce opportunities for effective awareness campaigns. Moreover, excessive documentation requirements hinder CSO activities, as youths must obtain travel permits for every movement. The conscription law also discourages young people from leaving their homes due to fear of abduction, leading to further disengagement from CSO programs.

The second consequence is the decline in youth engagement within CSO-led educational programs. Despite efforts by CSO workers to promote education, the number of youths participating has decreased under political constraints. After the introduction of the conscription law, participants A and B, both from educational institutions in Mon State, reported that students had to return home, forcing their organizations to shift to online learning. This transition reduced overall engagement in the education sector. The findings further support the political opportunity structure theory articulated by Rootes (1999), which argues that political systems shape social movements by expanding or constraining opportunities depending on their degree of openness or closure. In this context, youth education has been directly affected by the military government's use of violence, which has restricted civic spaces and, in turn, limited the capacity of youth-led social movements to organize and

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mobilize. Ring et al. (2020) observed that Myanmar's policies often exclude youth perspectives and perpetuate gender inequalities. A comparable situation occurred in Egypt, where authoritarian laws (No. 149 of 2019 and No. 218 of 2017) restricted youth participation in CSOs following the 2011 uprising (Marzouk, 2023). Based on these findings, it can be concluded that limited youth participation, driven by political constraints, has not only endangered youth workers but also reduced their interaction with CSOs in Mon State

The third consequence is the relocation of CSO operational offices. Participant A shared that their organization was forced to move to the border region due to political instability in Mon State. Participant C echoed this experience, noting that their organization now operates in areas outside military control while still targeting the Mon State population. According to Kitschelt's (2009) formulation of political opportunity structure theory, compliance with institutional rules and engagement through formal channels are contingent upon the openness of the political system. In this case, the closure of political opportunities has rendered institutional participation untenable, prompting many civil society organizations (CSOs) to relocate or operate from outside the country as a strategic response to heightened repression. Jagger (2018) emphasized that CSOs in conflict-affected areas often struggle to maintain organizational resilience and sustainability. Youth workers must therefore find innovative strategies to ensure continuity under restrictive conditions. This problem is further compounded by guest registration requirements and the conscription law. Participants A, B, C, and E explained that youths are unable to travel freely and must obtain multiple documents for movement, while fear of abduction discourages their presence in local communities.

Finally, CSOs face challenges in maintaining public trust. Under military control, youth activities are heavily restricted; unregistered organizations are prohibited from open advocacy, and young workers risk arrest or torture. Participants A, B, C, E, F, and G consistently reported that communities are increasingly reluctant to cooperate with CSOs. Villagers often reject projects by organizations not registered with the military government due to concerns for their own safety. However, when CSOs include a trusted youth representative from the local community, the public is more willing to collaborate. This also indicates the closed political opportunity defined by Rootes (1999) since the system repressed the civilians, they no longer have a choice except to non-align with the government policy. Mpagi (2022) similarly observed that CSOs require youth representation from grassroots communities to strengthen relationships and increase acceptance of their initiatives.

In conclusion, the study finds that the consequences faced by CSOs are directly linked to the political constraints imposed on youth. Documentation barriers, the conscription law, and restrictions on freedom collectively undermine youth participation and, by extension, the functioning of CSOs. As these organizations rely heavily on youth involvement, political constraints directly weaken their capacity to contribute effectively to society.

Conclusion

According to the research findings, youths in Mon State faced significant political constraints in participating in CSOs after the 2021 military coup. Three main constraints were identified: documentation issues, the mandatory military conscription law, and restrictions on freedom. The first constraint, documentation, posed challenges for young people due to registration and travel requirements. Second, the conscription law

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limits youths' ability to engage in on-ground activities after the coup. The final constraint involves restrictions on freedom of speech, expression, mobility, and assembly, which prevent youths from gathering, traveling, and expressing their views freely. These findings confirm that political constraints have directly hindered youth participation in CSOs in Mon State during the post-coup period.

As a result of this limited youth participation, CSOs in Mon State have also faced several consequences. The study identified four main consequences: (1) difficulties in spreading awareness to the public, as CSOs cannot operate openly, reducing community engagement; (2) limited youth involvement in programs initiated by CSOs, with both CSO workers and beneficiaries affected by security concerns under the conscription law; (3) loss of operational spaces, as many organizations have been forced to relocate due to youth safety concerns; and (4) a decline in public trust, as communities fear cooperating with unregistered CSOs that operate outside military oversight. Thus, the findings reveal that political constraints on youths have led to multiple organizational challenges for CSOs in Mon State.

Recommendations

1. Recommendations for youths

1.1 Prioritize digital engagement: To avoid unnecessary bureaucratic documents, youths should join more CSOs that operate mostly online and give the best service to the public. This approach offers safer, more impactful engagement and a valuable experience.

1.2 Maintain transnational contribution: Youths who were displaced to foreign countries to avoid conscription law and current politics should be contributing to the community in Myanmar through different organizations by joining CSOs through online participation.

1.3 Amplify international advocacy: Given that the freedom of youths in Myanmar is restricted, more voices from youths abroad are needed. They should amplify their voices to raise awareness regarding the situations in Myanmar.

2. Recommendations for CSOs leaders

2.1 Prioritize security and international funding: CSOs leaders must prioritize the security of youth participants and proactively connect with international donors to secure funding support for the youth in humanitarian needs. It would enhance more opportunities for youths and the community to receive more effective funding.

2.2 Implement adaptive strategy: CSOs should implement up-to-date strategies and operational plans that align with the military government's new laws and regulations towards youths. This would help us to adapt not only for youngsters but also for the CSOs themselves to survive in this horrible situation.

2.3 Shift to salary-based recruitment: The CSOs leaders also try to consider recruiting more salary-based instead of volunteer-based job opportunities to attract more youth participation in the post-coup. By doing so, youths will have more opportunities to gain their own money with their own preferred career.

Declaration for Use of AI

The researcher used AI tools solely for English language refinement. All ideas, analyses, and findings are based on original interview data, with no AI generated content included.

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