Ruptured space allows Myanmar youths to reimagine a new education system

Since the February coup, students in Myanmar have emerged as the invisible leaders of the resistance. They are boycotting the prevailing university education system and envisioning an alternative education site, free from institutional bureaucracies, disciplinary hierarchies, and a gate-keeping mentality. One proposed model is the Virtual Federal University (VFU), led by members of the Yangon University Students’ Union (UYSU), which aligns well with the decolonial methodologies, the new thematic curriculum development, and collaborative education model of the IIAS Humanities Across Borders (HAB) program.

The February 1st coup in Myanmar is the single most destructive force in recent years, one that destroyed everything built during the nascent democratic period between 2011 and 2021. For many minority areas, particularly Kachin and Karen, it was the third tragedy—the first two being the 70-year-old civil war and COVID-19—that denied hope that the war refugees and the internally might return home and rebuild lives. The Bamar majority on the plains now shares internally might return home and rebuild lives. Amidst all this mix of intense misery and shame; bewilderment and hopelessness. There is profound sadness and outrage; misery and shame; bewilderment and hopelessness. Amidst all this mix of intense feelings, many also have realized that there arrived a ruptured space, like a fertile ground ready to grow and nurture a new education system.

As this article goes to press in July 2021, young people are at the forefront of the resistance movement that is still unfolding five months after the coup. They continue to mobilize flash protests in cities, to undergo military training in Ethnic Armed Organizations-controlled areas (such as Karen, Karenni, and Kachin regions), and, more importantly, to educate the public that two popular slogans, “Attitude, Discipline, Knowledge” greet every student. Knowledge is neither objective, nor is it to serve individuals. It is subject to the State’s nation-building plans, and for Myanmar it is to sustain the idea of a nation centered on the interests of the Buddhist Burman majority. Education is merely a tool to mobilize flash protests in cities, to resist the coup as a harbinger of new things. Nevertheless, the coup teaches both Myanmar and the world many lessons, and youth are showing us how to collectively reset the old and corrupt system, by daring to seize the opportunity of the open space of rupture.

As the youth who dare to talk back to the military, the NLD, and the international community, as drivers of the revolution, they have unfettered hopes for the country. Their goals are not means-adjusted, nor is their vision limited by material resources or available international support. The many unpopular slogans they created in February have captured the public’s imagination since June. Radical claims such as “Uproot the Fascist Army”, “Rise up when oppressed”, “Strike back when attacked” set the tone of the resistance and showed the country the tenor of self-defence and the options for protest and resistance. Always ahead of the general public, young people, particularly union members of different universities across the country, are gradually emerging as the invisible leaders of the resistance. One of the powerful tools they employ against the coup regime is mobilizing their fellow students to boycott the prevailing university education system.

Reimagining education
Education systems around the world are often centralized and hierarchical. Governments take a paternalistic role to decide for their young generations what is best for them. In Myanmar, historically, the first and foremost goal of the education system has been to produce skilled and good citizens for the State. Education in this context and philosophy is rather like a factory assembly line to reproduce the status quo that benefits a few. Conformity and a lack of deviation are the principles behind the state-controlled education system. Outside schools across the country, green and white words “Attitude, Discipline, Knowledge” greet every student. Knowledge is neither objective, nor is it to serve individuals. It is subject to the State’s nation-building plans, and for Myanmar it is to sustain the idea of a nation centered on the interests of the Buddhist Burman majority. Education is merely a tool to mobilize flash protests in cities, to resist the coup as a harbinger of new things. Nevertheless, the coup teaches both Myanmar and the world many lessons, and youth are showing us how to collectively reset the old and corrupt system, by daring to seize the opportunity of the open space of rupture.

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State, different values are attached to different individuals based on their race, ethnicity, religion, ability, and sexual orientation. Such practices are generally accepted as standards to protect the interests of social groups with different indigenous school policies and practices as ‘good intentions’, particularly those implemented by the ethnic Suu Kyi-led government, as the State won the trust of the public. Trust obscures injustices. Faith prolongs inaction. Union students, on the other hand, have always been critical of governments. From the independence time through the Socialist era to the current revolutionary period, union students pressurized successive governments to return education to the public rather than the State. Today, as never before, the education system is on the brink of collapse or has the highest potential for seismic change, depending on how one interprets the current situation. Students’ movements have pressured the UD government, from the internet shutdown to the defence of the genocide at the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to the educational reforms in 2019, have largely been justified. The coup proved that students were right to be critical of the government that could not avert the army from making many political gains. When the general public was seen to be reunified, students’ demands were realized that the former had now won public support, and that their movement was gaining ground as a consequence of news reports. Their movement was on the brink of gaining public support, and what are their demands for the government and politicians? More importantly, what is their alternative educational model like?

What next for the students?

University students have formed Interim Education Councils to reimagine education. The discussions often revolved around students online to envision a federal education to support federal democracy. Federalism is a political ideology of multiple countries united by the army without making many political changes. When the general public was seen to be reunified, students’ demands were realized that the former had now won public support, and that their movement was gaining ground as a consequence of news reports. Their movement was on the brink of gaining public support, and what are their demands for the government and politicians? More importantly, what is their alternative educational model like?

To be able to answer such questions, it is important to understand the site of education, i.e., physical buildings and compounds called schools and universities, and the nature of student bodies that occupy this site that collectively pose a credible threat to governments, particularly dictators. The discussions on the material and symbolic power is the dynamism of the student union’s building on the campus of Yangon University on 7th of May, 1962, by order of General Ne Win. A physical gathering of students always threatens the dictators since student unionization historically remains relatively uncontaminated by neoliberal corporate agents. Although students still feel empowered to demand change through education, Ruptured space opened up by the coup expedited such an action. Rather than fighting for liberation individually, students through unions and groups strive to establish a parallel education system with many autonomous universities to counter the centralized coup education system. Online platforms and lessons necessitated by the pandemic make it possible to reimagine an alternative education away from traditional brick and mortar education. As some US university students demanded change in their curricula after the 2008 financial crisis and after the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement, Myanmar students are now envisioning an alternative educational experience. To this end, new model of education, Virtual Federal University (VFU), led by the Union of Yangon University of Yangon Students’ Union (UYSU). Three principles underpin VFU. They are 1) to experiment with a learning and teaching model that will facilitate the federal education system; 2) to provide free education; and 3) to center students’ voices and demands in the operation of the University. For a country like Myanmar that avoids federalism for fear of a break-up, mobilizing students towards federalism via education can be interpreted as an overtly political act. However, federalism must be understood in terms of everyday civic actions. That includes how different students interact with each other, how educators view their students, and how classes promote students’ esteem, dignity, and a sense of belonging in a community. Through carefully selected learning environments, the nature of delivery, information technology, VFU aims to foster federal conversations and practices, and to build a federal democratic country from the bottom up.

Partners

Since its inception in early May 2021, VFU has created lessons that can be downloaded online. To expand education in areas without Internet, it seeks to partner with radio stations, TV stations, and local learning hubs. VFU lessons vary from Molecular Biology to Critical Reading to Myths about Burmese History. VFU educators and translators donate their talents and time to provide a wide range of lessons for different language speakers of Burma, an arduous task for a university that does not aim to depend on financial donations. Through different international partners, such as the Global History Lab of Princeton University, it aims to offer certificate courses to selected students. The decolonial methodologies, new thematic curriculum development, and collaborative education model of the IIAS Humanities Across Borders initiative is a welcome addition to the VFU’s mission. Hall envisions new critical spaces of education free of institutional bureaucracies, disciplinary practices, and gate-keeping mindsets, like the one forged by the youth in Myanmar. The Covid pandemic has accelerated online learning education activities. However, if VFU is to succeed, global educational institutions, individual educators, and activists must believe in the possibility of a free site of education to help change a social order, transform politics and most of all, usher in a new way of learning and teaching for everyone.

Notes

1. For more on deciarchic arrangement and youth-led movement, see Jordt, Ingrid, Tham, Tharaphi, Sue Ye Lin, “How Generation Z galvanised a revolutionary movement against Myanmar’s 2021 military coup, Singapore: IIAS-Paléos’ Institute, May 2021.

Humanities Across Borders (HAB) curriculum development

Aarti Kaur

The second phase of the Humanities Across Borders (HAB) initiative began with the consortium partners in the process of signing a curriculum development agreement to further the vision set out in the HAB manifesto that was jointly drafted in Chiang Mai just before the workshops had concluded last year. HAB’s model of curriculum development attends to community-based lived or experiential knowledge, as well as indigenous knowledges as non-expert knowledge. HAB’s manifesto describes this in its preamble:

“We envision a university that retains its rightful civic role and responsibility as a centripetal and centrifugal system to mobilise multiple discourses and modes of knowledge exchange. Our goal, as educators and institutions, is to identify and explore the expansive variety of modes and contexts of acting in and on, and the world. We propose to create border-crossing spaces within and outside universities where academics, students, and communities learn from, and act with and work with, each other, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and recognition.”

This pedagogical vision will guide HAB’s early steps in the institutionalisation the initial activities of HAB and the exploratory education agenda over the next five years. Four syllabus tracks based on themes of voicing, meaning-making (focusing on worlds-in-use, space/place) animate HAB collaborative curriculum development partnerships co-created with students. Students are in dialogue with other localities in the network. Four anchor institutions on four continents have been identified to four anchor institutions on four continents have been identified to

HAB at ICAS

To further advance syllabi creation, this workshop will leverage its participation at ICAS12. Although the partners cannot be physically reunited like in 2019 during ICAS11, the network will reconvene remotely from August 24-28. HAB is convening the following roundtables to discuss situated methodologies along the themes of rice, indigo, food and place-making:

Rice as method: a humanitarians across borders syllabus In-the-making

The discussion intends to explore rice related legacies, resistances and revivals in a trans-regional context. It will be an occasion to discuss how to archive memories, biographies and narratives around rice – techniques, seed conservation, varieties, irrigation, crop cycles, rice – towards a repertoire of agro-ecological cartographies where community-based knowledge of rice and other staples form the mainstay of lessons and syllabi across participating institutions.

Place, nature and indige

We take the case of the indigo production process to see how the nexus of an object, processes, policies and politics influences the weight of politics (be it in environmental movements, in heritage-making or sustaining livelihoods) in specific contexts. The ideas is to build a set of parameters towards a teaching model similar to the craft practitioners. We will leverage our institutional networks to present best practices, modes of delivery, and interactions, to develop these themes.

Riparian spaces: water, food sovereignty

The significance of water in local, regional, and global contexts. The idea is to develop a more intersectional, humanist approach to knowledge often relegated to the margins of society. Parents interpret the government’s orientation. Such practices are generally un contestable in the context of politics (be it in environmental movements, in heritage-making or sustaining livelihoods).

Food sovereignty: rice, indigo, and food

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Mobility, memory and livelihood: a trans-regional discussion on place-making

The overarching aim is to make the lens of place-making legible for students and educators. To explore the value of everyday realities, contradictions and connections encountered through ‘place’ in local, regional, and global contexts. In what ways does ‘place’ enable/disable mobilities across borders? And, for a more intersectional, humanist approach to migration and human futures, can we imagine a place-based education model that accounts for how livelihoods are negotiated through place-making across national boundaries? What are the impacts of such a model? What are the implications for the material, symbolic, and political spaces within communities (towns, villages, neighbourhoods; forests, hills and plains; sea and shorelines?)