Living under Military rule:
Rakhine and Paletwa People’s Perceptions of the 2021 Military Coup
The military coup d'état, staged in Myanmar on 1 February 2021 under the accusation of electoral fraud in the 2020 General Election, completely reversed Myanmar’s democratic transition process. All over the country people have protested the military coup in a variety of ways. For example, since February 2, almost every household at 8 pm, beats pots and pans or strikes tin cans and honks car horns to indicate that they are against the military dictatorship. Myanmar people have a tradition of beating tins and cans to chase away the devil and evil forces, which in this case is the military leaders. In daytime, hundreds of thousands of people have since 4 February participated in non-violent demonstrations, and the army and police forces of the military junta have increasingly used armed force to crack down violently on the protesters. In addition, after the coup, the Minister of Health, Dr. Myint Htwe, resigned, and on 2 February a Civil Disobedient Movement (CDM), which led doctors and nurses to strike first was launched on Facebook. Soon after many other public sector workers and departmental staff across the country joined the CDM, bringing many civil services and banks to a halt.

As the CDM and civilian protests grew in the whole country, almost the entire Rakhine state remained quiet and did not join the protests. Criticism of Rakhine people surfaced on social media and many people elsewhere in Myanmar started to suspect that Rakhine people were supporting the military takeover or just practicing neutralism. This coincided with the news that Rakhine state had regained 4G internet access after the coup, while there was internet black out in the rest of the country. Soon after there was news that the Arakan Army (AA) – the largest ethnic armed organization (EAO) in Rakhine State - had been in talks with the military, and that it was probably in the process of joining hands with the military. Subsequently, the Arakan National Party (ANP) – the largest political party in Rakhine State - was criticized for accepting the military’s offer to join
its new State Administration Council (SAC). These moves strengthened the assumption that Rakhine people perhaps were not against the military coup.

This research paper challenges these assumptions. Based on interviews with people in those areas of Rakhine state and Paletwa region of Chin state that prior to the coup suffered from armed conflict between the military and the AA, the paper argues that the low level of anti-coup protests particularly by Rakhine people does not mean that they support the military coup or that they have benefitted from the military takeover. Quite the contrary, both our Chin and Rakhine interviewees strongly condemned the coup. They held back on protesting either due to fear of military counter-violence or in the case of the Rakhine, because they were also very critical of the NLD, and therefore were reluctant to take sides.

The aim of the research was to understand better how people living in the conflict areas perceive the military coup and the changes it has brought. It also uncovers their daily experiences on the ground, their security situation and their willingness and ability to engage in protests. Given the high importance of the situation of the Rohingya Muslim minority for conflict and political dynamics in Rakhine state we have a shorter section on this topic but we were only able to interview two Rohingya people who are currently residing in IDP (internally displaced people) camps in northern Rakhine state. We conclude with a few reflections on future aspirations for federal democracy.

The paper is based on qualitative interviews via telephone, as face to face interviews were impossible to conduct due to the political situation and the COVID-19 pandemic. The interview persons were selected from a list of persons whom we have interviewed before in pre-coup research in northern and central Rakhine state and Paletwa, Chin State. Key informant interviews were done with village and ward administrators, religious leaders, women leaders as well as CSOs. Furthermore, to reflect the voice of the local people, in-depth interviews were organized with ordinary local people. The research was done within a period of three weeks, beginning in the first week of February 2021. The interviews were challenged by the security situation: some people were reluctant to answer the questions in detail due to the security concerns of responding on phone calls, some asked to used Telenor sim cards because they were afraid that the military was recording the use of MPT cards and some persons were unwilling to answer the call.
Perceptions of the military coup

Irrespective of ethnicity, all the interview persons expressed that they did not at all like the military coup – some referring to it as the military dictatorship. Some of the Rakhine people were, however, reluctant to comment on the political situation and some expressed that the coup had not made much of a difference to them. Those who expressed dislike of the coup, at the same time made it clear that they also did not support the National League for Democracy (NLD) and its government under Aung San Suu Kyi. Some expressed that they saw the coup as a power struggle between the Bamar – the army, and the NLD - and that they were now waiting to see how the political situation developed. They said they had been told by the Arakan Army (AA) to observe the situation before they should take a stand or choose side.

The perceptions of the Rakhine people are strongly influenced by their pre-coup experiences with violence and the military’s unruliness, even during the times when Myanmar people elsewhere spoke about the era of democracy. They expressed that they have never experienced democratic rule under any government, only either military dictatorship or what they called the NLD’s civilian dictatorship. They felt no significant difference between the two dictatorships. The people of Rakhine were subjected to civil war and the military's brutal killings of locals during the five years of the NLD government. Throughout the crisis in Rakhine State, the NLD did not stand up for the Rakhine people but stood with the Tatmadaw. The Rakhine were also very dissatisfied that the NLD-appointed Union Election Committee (UEC) cancelled the 2020 elections in the areas where the Arakan National Party (ANP), which has many voters among the Rakhine, had strong chances of winning. This happened even after the Tatmadaw and the AA agreed to a temporary ceasefire, which lasted during the election. Civil society activists said that the NLD government never seriously discussed how to address the extreme sufferings of Rakhine State with the ANP. They claimed that the NLD mercilessly ignored Rakhine State.

A Rakhine villager whose village was set on fire by the army on September 3, 2020, after fighting between the army and AA shared his bitter experiences:
When they [army soldiers] saw a child running, they killed him. When they saw a woman, they killed the woman. If a person was running in front of them, they stabbed him with a knife and shot him with a gun from behind. They did not consider our Rakhine people as living beings. We were not valued even as an animal. They did whatever they wanted to the unarmed people and they accused us of all kinds of capricious charges. Hoping to appeal to their humanitarian compassion, we explained to the soldiers that we were honest farmers, but they killed us anyway. The night when the village was set on fire, two boys in our village were shot dead for allegedly having links to the AA: one was the father of a child and the other was a bachelor. Both were honest people working in a welding business. We have never seen AA. We did not even dare to pick up the bodies that night, so we had to collect them the next morning. Can you imagine how they felt if you can put yourself in their shoes?

He continued the conversation by pointing to the disappointment with the NLD and the Bamar majority, saying: “Daw Aung San Suu Kyi said that we are people from the same group living in the same land and drinking the same water. But none of the Bamar stood up for us and spoke out about our sufferings, unfair bullying and physical harms. We are victimized by the oppressors and neglected by the others. So, is what goes on in Myanmar now [the coup] concerned with us? I don't think so.”

Like this villager, other Rakhine interviewees expressed a lot of grievances with the military and the NLD, who they perceive to have both practiced majoritarian rule by favoring the Bamar majority group. Against this background, they said they would support neither side or that they were reluctant to choose side. One man for instance said: “We are not neutral now. A military coup should not take place at all. But I disapprove of NLD government as well.”

Similarly, a member of a Rakhine women’s CSO, highlighted that despite the ceasefire now in Rakhine state, people were not supportive of the military, and yet also remained skeptical of the NLD:

We have been fleeing due to the conflicts for five years, and only now [referring to the ceasefire between the AA and the military] we get a chance to breathe freely. But our mind is not relaxing, and rather we will wait and see what happens next. We are not sitting on the fence nor being neutral. We are very clear that we like none of them [the
military and the NLD]. But I totally condemn the military coup. We don’t like any dictator.

Reflecting these views of the military, the research also found that the decision of the Arakan National Party (ANP) to accept the military’s offer to join its new State Administration Council (SAC) was not in agreement with many Rakhine people. The top officials of the ANP did not inform the people about the decision and neither did they try to get the public’s opinion or consult the ordinary party members. The decision led to disagreements among the founding members of the party, and some of these, along with the youth wing of the ANP, resigned from the party as they disagreed with the decision. Some Rakhine people also protested in front of ANPs office, demanding the ANP not to accept the offer, and 52 Rakhine CSOs made a joint statement objecting to the decision. A member of one of these CSOs stated that the ANP should not by any means have accepted the military’s offer. Only two Rakhine interviewees had more mixed views, saying that they wanted to wait and see what benefits the military would bring after the ANP joined the SAC, and one said that he thought that the ANP accepted the offer to serve the interests of the party and to protect the people. He thought that the party was maybe thinking that it was better to ‘go with the flow’ rather than go against the military in the current situation.

Regarding the Arakan Army (AA), the interviewees were unsure of what stance it had taken on the military coup. Unlike some other EAOs, like the Karen National Union (KNU), the AA did not officially condemn the coup but kept silent during the time of our research. The interviewees were aware that the AA, which made a temporary ceasefire agreement with the Tatmadaw before the November elections, had met twice with the Tatmadaw to discuss a long-term truce. They also said that it was visible now that the AA was mobilizing more freely than before and that AA members were providing security in the places where the Tatmadaw had no troops. But overall, the situation was very unclear for the interviewees.

The Chin interviewees in Paletwa were very firmly against the military coup. They found it totally unacceptable. Even though they have similarly suffered from violent conflict prior to the coup, they did not express resentment for the NLD government as the Rakhine interviewees did. They also expressed the view that they wanted to continue according to the 2020 election results. The Chin in Paletwa have over the past two years been sandwiched by the fight between the AA and the military.
Lack of clear border demarcation between Rakhine and Chin states has caused great grievance for the Chin people, who became scapegoated and caught inside the crisis between the Rakhine and the military.

In the current situation, the Chin in Paletwa found no difference in their security situation. Prior to the coup their area was already declared a ‘black area’ (i.e., a dangerous conflict area) that was under military control. One interviewee said that even though they were against the coup, the strong military presence meant that he and others had to keep silent and could not protest like in other parts of the country. When asked about the ANP joining the SAC, one Chin woman was very critical, saying that only “very power-crazy people would accept such an officer”, adding: “it seemed to be for the personal interest, the agreement was made by only three to four top leaders of the party, and anyone who cooperated with the military is condemned.” Her view reflected the general Chin position against anyone collaborating with the military.

The situation of the Rohingya and other minorities

All the interviewees unanimously voiced that they did not believe the coup would bring any benefits or improvements to the minority groups in Rakhine state - like the Rohingya (locally referred to as Muslims) - where the Rakhine Buddhists constitute the majority. The military, we were told, would never take care of the rights of the minorities, because for so long it had been engaged in dividing the ethnic groups in Rakhine state.

Since the coup, the military has tried to somehow reach out to the Rohingya, who were severely affected by military atrocities in a conflict that raged in Rakhine state since October 2016 and during 2017, leaving over 700,000 Rohingya to flee to Bangladesh. In a speech on 8 February, the General Commander in Chief, Min Aung Hlaing, spoke about repatriation of the refugees. He said: “We are negotiating to receive and bring back the displaced people of Rakhine state in accordance with the stance of Tatmadaw and as per the bilateral agreement between two countries.” However, our Rakhine and Rohingya respondents did not believe this to be any more than a show and an empty promise. One Rakhine interviewee thought it was just to relieve the generals from the accusations of crimes against humanity that they are facing in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Haag.
A Rakhine interviewee said that the repatriation of the Rohingya (referred to as Muslims) is not only a matter of making a deal between two heads of state – Myanmar and Bangladesh - but also a question of whether the displaced people in reality want to return. The CSO official added that the voices of the people living in Rakhine state, including not only Rohingya, but also the other minority groups like the Marmar Gyi and Kaman should be heard and taken into consideration. Repatriation should be done in consultation with the people of both sides, rather than through an order issued by the high-ranking officials of the two countries. Only then, can conflicts and problems be avoided, he told us.

According to our analysis of various social media postings by Rohingya people after the coup, it seems very unlikely that the Rohingya in the refugee camps would follow any decision of the military to repatriate them. Many Rohingya have on social media expressed contempt for the coup and support for the resistance inside Myanmar. Likewise, a Rohingya interviewee in an IDP camp in Rakhine state said, "I don’t like the military coup at all. No one from our camp likes the coup. Our minority no longer has faith and confidence in any politician. Those who we thought were good [referring here to the NLD] turned out to be unreliable, so we lost hope for us.” Even though there have been many tensions between the Rakhine Buddhists and the Rohingya in the past, it seemed that they agree on being skeptical towards and not trusting neither the NLD nor the military.

The two Rohingya interviewees clearly had not trust in politicians, due to the disappointments the past. When we asked one of them what he thought about the ANP joining the SAC he said at first that he did not want to comment, but then added “the ANP during its electoral campaign said that Rohingya and Rakhine people are blood related brothers, sharing the same land and drinking the same water, and that the ANP will rule fairly and justly within the prevailing rule of law in the state, but this was just music to the international ears.” He said he could not trust anything due to the chaotic situation in the ANP party as some accepted, but some rejected the offer to join the SAC. He said that according to his life experience no politician had ever looked out for the rights of minorities. The other Rohingya interviewee said that he wanted democracy because he believed democracy could somewhat end the human rights violations that they have suffered. So, in that respect he wanted the NLD to win over the military.
Daily life under the coup – security and basic human needs

After the coup there has been a lot of information shared by Myanmar people on social media that supports the assumption that Rakhine people are enjoying a certain privilege in Rakhine State after the coup. However, according to our interviewees this is totally baseless and lacks evidence. Even though Rakhine State has felt some relief with the temporary ceasefire after the two-year long armed conflict, they are sharing the same oppression, intimidation and clout of the military as anywhere else in the country without receiving any privileges. The relaunch of the 4G internet connection after the coup is not reliable and like the rest of the nation, they must use internet via other VPN addresses to be safe. Internet access is also here cut off from 1 am to 9 am every day.

Even without the armed conflict, Rakhine people have since the coup faced indirect intimidation and received security to only some extent. Troops have been deployed everywhere. The military has also been mobilizing and displaying its power around Rakhine State’s capital, Sittwe. There are military vehicles and tanks every night, forcing people to stay at home. The soldiers shout through a loudspeaker that people must stay home and not gather for protests. The soldiers are also saying that they are providing people with safety, but when they announced this the first time, the families at home laughed and said, “they [soldiers] are the ones who are the threat to the people, but they said that they were the ones protecting us,” according to one Rakhine woman. People perceive the tanks in public as a kind of new intimidation of the people.

The military has also claimed that it is now clearing landmines in the area, but according to our interviewees they are just pretending to do so, and not in the places where it is really needed. A Rakhine resident of one of the two villages that were set on fire in September 2020 said they still did not feel safe from landmines:

When a cow went into the forest, the cow was caught in a landmine. When a man went to the forest, he was been hit by a landmine. So, we do not dare to go back to our village. We are taught to run when we see a soldier. One day work, two days’ rest. The property we had earned with hard work was set on fire. How can I go back to the village? How can we believe that they are now clearing the landmines that they had put to kill us?
Another Rakhine woman said that although the military had cleared landmines, a total of four herdsmen had since then been killed by landmines in the forest.

Even though the temporary ceasefire between the AA and the military has been extended the interviewees still worried that armed conflict would resume. In addition, the residents of the IDP camps from the previous conflicts worried that they will no longer receive humanitarian food support from the World Food Program (WFP). Remittances have also stopped, as there are no cash flows due to the closure of banks.

People outside the camps are also suffering in terms of basic human needs like food, clothing, and shelter. Since the military coup, commodity prices in Rakhine State have skyrocketed. For instance, the onions have risen from 1,000 kyats to 3,000 kyats a viss. The price of palm oil has jumped from 2,500 kyats to 5,000 kyats a viss. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, people have struggled for their livelihood for almost the whole year, and now political unrest has led to roadblocks, rising commodity prices, and raising concerns about long-term resilience, said a town elder. In Paletwa the price of basic foodstuffs has fallen slightly since the ceasefire. A Chin woman said, “In Rakhine, people have started to suffer because the roads are closed, and prices are going up, but we have been suffering for a long time. And even though the prices here have dropped they have not returned to normal.”

**Constraints on protests and civil disobedience**

The street protests in Rakhine state have been much fewer than in other parts of Myanmar. There was little knowledge available on whether public servants were participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) – e.g., by striking and refusing to work for the military regime. Also, Rakhine people have not participated like others in the beating of pots and pans protest. One village elder in an area previously affected by armed conflict, however, said: “Bamars [referring to Burmese people outside Rakhine state] started only now [after the coup] to drum the tins, but our village have already chased away the evil Bamar soldiers since the time of Thadinggyunt [Buddhist light festival in the month of October], when we shouted: Go away Bamar soldiers, military dogs are not welcome, run, run Bamar soldiers, chase them away, chase them away!”
It seemed, however that Rakhine people were protesting indirectly by boycotting the military-related products. All banks were closed and there was no cash circulation in the state, and this may indicate that some civil disobedience was conducted. We also learned that people in southern Rakhine state - Thandwe, Taunggoke, and Gwa – which did not suffer from armed conflict in the past and is adjacent to the mainland, did street protests for at least three days. Rakhine people residing in Yangon have also joined the General Strike Committee of Nationalities (GSCN), which since 11 February has brought together around 27 ethnic groups, including Bamar, in protesting the military coup and in demanding federal democracy. The slogans of the GSCN are not connected to the NLD or any other party, but focused on changing the whole system, according to one Rakhine CSO worker. Perhaps therefore the Rakhine joined it.

These activities suggest that the low level of protests in northern and central Rakhine state where our interviewee persons live, does not necessarily mean that Rakhine people do not want to oppose the military coup. No protest does not mean acceptance of military dictatorship. A few interviewees shared the view that the lack of protests reflected that Rakhine people neither wanted to support the military nor the NLD, because Rakhine state had seen no significant progress during NLD’s time in government. One Rakhine interviewee for instance said that he did not join CDM as this may signal that he supported the NLD, even though he was against military dictatorship. Others said that lack of protests was because of fear. A CSO worker for instance highlighted that the Rakhine people are reluctant to protest, because they have severely suffered excruciating pain and trouble of armed conflicts for two years, with inhumane killing of people, arrests, and the disappearance 400 people who have still not returned home. They have unhealed wounds and injury from the recent past, full of emotional damages and scars, which makes them fear and deter from joining protests. Another CSO worked said that he wanted to protest but that it was impossible to protest alone. He thought it would take two to three months to convince the Rakhine people who have not recovered from the old nightmare wounds to go out and protest.

At the same time, it is dangerous to protest, because the police and army are closely monitoring people, so it is difficult to make a move and organize. For instance, when the Student’s Union and 20 students working with a CSO attended an information sharing meeting to discuss future democratization potentials at the end of February, the police and military came and made arrests. This
was only a very casual meeting, which indicates that the risks of protesting were very high even in
the early days after the coup.

In Paletwa the situation has been slightly different. Already at the early stage of the coup, people in
the main town of Samee/Sami made street protests and denounced the military junta. Several
government staff also joined the CDM. However, the protests were violently cracked down and the
government workers were strongly warned by the General Administrative Department (GAD) not to
do CDM, but instead to take leave. So apart from one known municipal officer, everyone else seem
to have removed their names from the CDM list.

Overall, the military has tightened its control of the Paletwa area. Soldiers and police have closed all
the gates of Paletwa so that people from Matupi, Mintat and other areas adjacent to Paletwa cannot
visit anymore. The military also sent out an order, stating that all unregistered motorcycles will be
confiscated. Since most motorcycles in the area are without license, people can no longer travel into
the towns. The military also prohibited travel permits. Resultantly, people are prevented from public
protest and it is very difficult to organize. They GAD officials also warned Chin youth, who planned
to do a protest, that if they protested it may create problems with the Rakhine people living in Paletwa,
who so far had kept silent about the coup. In short, the Chin residents were uncertain of whether the
Rakhine supported the military. Instead of public protests, they have showed opposition by throwing
anti-coup letters into private houses, sticking them on public buildings and posting them on social
media.

**Conclusion: low hopes for a future democracy**

As in the rest of Myanmar the situation in Rakhine state has been extremely difficult after the coup.
Unlike what some people in Myanmar have believed, the Rakhine people are not getting any
privileges or seeing any improvement in their situation since the military took power. The ANP
leaders’ acceptance of the offer to join the military’s State Administrative Council (SAC) and the
AA’s negotiations with the military, has not brought any benefits to the ordinary Rakhine people.
Instead, like most people in the rest of the country, the Rakhine as well as the Paletwa interviewees
disapprove of the military coup. Some Rakhine people perceive the current political situation as
mainly a power struggle between what they view as two dictators – the army and the NLD – and
they are very critical of the NLD. So, some Rakhine have taken a “wait-and-see” position without
supporting any side. This may be one reason why few Rakhine have publicly protested the military regime. Yet another reason is that the army and the police are tightly controlling the areas, and the fact that many Rakhine are still trying to heal their wounds and traumas from the past two years of armed conflict. Lack of anti-coup protests is therefore not the same as practicing neutralism or supporting the coup of military.

The Chin people of Paletwa, in contrast to many Rakhine, strongly expressed the wish to conduct decisive anti-coup protest that also support the NLD. Yet this is near impossible for them because they face military intimidation, and their area is tightly closed off and controlled by army and police.

Despite the differences in view of the NLD, both Rakhine and Chin interviewees saw the military coup as destroying the hope of democracy in Myanmar. They fear that the military will not let go of power. One female CSO worker said that this was her third experience of a military coup d’état, and she feared that the military regime would hold onto power for at least 20 to 30 years, leaving any hope of democratization in Myanmar far into the future. Comparably a Rohingya man said that “the military does not want democracy so we will never achieve democracy in the nation due to the coup”. And a Chin man said that he felt that the situation was turned 10 years backward, adding: “There is no point to believe, that there will be an election after one year although this is what the State Administration Council said. We will be under a military regime at least until the Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing turns 80 years old.”

Yet, some interviewees were more optimistic. They believed that the young people who are protesting now are far more capable than the 88-generation youth – that is, those young people who protested the military regime in 1988, but who did not manage to get democracy. They had confidence that the young people today could communicate with the international community and be able to uproot the military dictatorship. They also hoped that the youth could enable a better democracy than the system that existed prior to the coup where the civilian government had to share power with the military.

Several of the interviewees aspired to a new form of federal democracy that does not involve a return to the pre-coup situation. One of the Rakhine interviewees, who saw both the military and the previous NLD government as dictators said: “meaningful federal democracy of each and every
nationality can be achieved only when federal democracy of all the national groups is realized in line with the Panglong agreement and after revoking the 2008 Constitution.” He was not sure if he should support the CRPH (Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw) – the parliamentary committee that claims to be the legitimate government and that is made up of 17 MP-elects from the 2020 elections, 15 of whom are from the NLD. He said: “I am waiting for the CRPH’s move. I think if the CRPH follows the 2008 constitution, it will become a dictatorial government. So, at this moment I cannot make a choice to stand with any side.” Another Rakhine interviewee said: "Unless the 2008 constitution is abolished, it will not be better whoever the government is." Some politically experienced people also pointed out that the current political crisis could only be resolved by forming an interim government comprising representatives from all the different ethnic people and after revoking the 2008 constitution. They call for a federal union, based on a collective decision among the many groups.

At the time when these opinions were expressed, the CRPH had still not announced that it too supported the abolition of the 2008 Constitution and the formation of federal democracy. These were put forward in a CRPH statement on 5 March, and the NLD members of the CRPH has also begun to reach out to the ethnic armed organizations and most recently to Rohingya leaders by recognizing the military atrocities and injustices that they have faced. The CRPH has also begun to speak about forming an interim government. If the NLD through the CRPH can create trust and prove that they will include the various ethnic groups into decision-making this could become very significant in reversing the military coup and creating a new democracy. Nonetheless, a future democracy of Myanmar is still very difficult to envision as the military is steadfastly clinging onto power and cracking down violently on any civilian protest. The CRPH’s performance is also still unsatisfactory according to many ethnic minorities, and likely even more so in Rakhine state where mistrust in the NLD is very high. It is unknown how the ANP stands in relation to the CRPHs, but a spokesperson from the AA on 23 March did declare that the AA was against the military crackdown on protesters, which could signal that the AA may not be collaborating with the army. Bridging the difference divides is a challenge now but is a very important step in moving forward with a unified disapproval of military rule and aspirations for federalism.