Unarmed Civilian Protection in Post-Coup Myanmar

Local civilians and communities use proactive nonviolent strategies to protect themselves and others from state violence

As conflict progresses and authoritarians learn our playbook and shrink the civic space, so ways of doing UCP also have to change. We need to adopt an intersectional approach that builds protection into wider struggles for social justice.
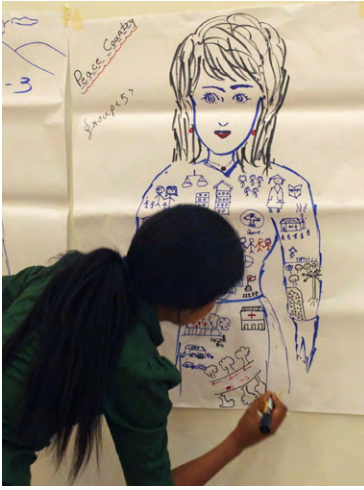
(Diah Kusumaningrum, Creating Safer Space Asia Regional Research Forum, Bangkok, February 2024)

Detail of a storyboard drawing by a farmer from Maungdaw Township, Rakhine State, Myanmar. Project link.

Key messages

- In Myanmar, civilians use local unarmed civilian protection (UCP) strategies to keep themselves and others safe from state violence after the 2021 coup by the military junta SAC (State Administration Council).

- Civilians in different states and regions of the country have been working within complex micro-contexts to create safer spaces and enable safe early warning communication to protect themselves and others from the state violence and related threats.

- Especially in areas which have experienced violent conflict for decades, civilians rely on networks of well-established civil society organizations, NGOs, and religious institutions, and on existing UCP knowledge, to address the increased threats.

- Civilians in other areas have devised local UCP strategies more spontaneously in reaction to new threats, but have equally relied on established organizations and the authority of figures such as religious leaders to make people safer.

- The Myanmar case suggests that local UCP can contribute to safer spaces, even where outside actors' access is extremely difficult and the threat comes from state violence. International protection actors need to find ways to support and fund such local protection of civilian (PoC) efforts.

What We Know

In Myanmar, people have protected themselves for decades. Previous research by *Creating Safer Space* team members showed that this has included community self-protection from armed conflict and violent oppression under the military rule from the mid-twentieth century.

During the democratic opening from 2008–2020, Myanmar saw both a peace negotiation process with some ethnic armed groups alongside ongoing armed conflict between the state's military and some other groups, which created a need for continued local protection.

The opening of the country to international humanitarian and aid organizations during this time made it possible for external UCP actors to support local protection. For example, in 2012 Nonviolent Peaceforce started to train volunteers in several states as local conflict and ceasefire monitors and later helped create a network of Emerging Women Leaders in civil society, who have developed culturally relevant protection mechanisms.

What We Found

Creating Safer Space research shows that **UCP has been continuing in communities since the 2021 military coup and has adapted to the heightened levels of state violence**. Among the 26 *Creating Safer Space* projects, three have dealt specifically with unarmed civilian protection from violence and displacement in the context of post-coup Myanmar. This research shows that locally-led unarmed civilian protection continues to be effective in protecting people and communities in sites of state violence, despite the massive shrinking in civic space and the challenges this entails.

- A project studying changing strategy and practice of civilian protection under the military junta, with particular focus on Kachin and Northern Shan, found that threats in these states today can be traced to several types of violent actors: the junta's law enforcement agencies, non-state armed actors including the pre-coup ethnic armed groups and militias and post-coup ethnic revolutionary organizations, as well as illegal businesses. Military airstrikes, forced recruitment, extortion, and other forms of violence have increased. Furthermore, the intensification of mining activity to fund the war is negatively impacting environment and people. Despite this deteriorated situation, the project found that existing civil society organizations, NGOs, and religious institutions together with communities continue to use established UCP mechanisms such as community early warning–early response (CEWER), proactive presence, and monitoring to address these forms of violence, none of which was completely new to these states. Their UCP activities are most effective when implemented as coordinated, collective efforts. In Kachin, these are facilitated by kinship relations between central stakeholders.

- A project on community-level spontaneous UCP in Meiktila (Mandalay region) and Kachin state similarly found a wealth of local UCP activities related to displacement and other direct violences, including protective accompaniment, negotiations by elders, the provision of ID cards, and the documentation of human rights abuses. Religious organizations often act as first responders to conflict, while sacred sites function as 'safe havens'. The authority and legitimacy of religious leaders often determines their UCP actions' effectiveness, although this is context-specific.

- A project on communities' violence perceptions and coping mechanisms, including UCP, in Rakhine state, highlighted how the ethnic divide between Arakanese Buddhists and Muslims shapes both the perception of armed groups and experiences of violence, but also the practices of community-led UCP in Rakhine. Overall, the project found more local protection opportunities for Arakanese Buddhists, while Muslims in Rakhine rely more on international or third-party actors. Existing UCP strategies depend on ethnic kinship ties, direct or indirect ties with authorities, the existence or lack of knowledge on UCP, and wealth, so that UCP networks are intersectionally different for different groups and individuals. The project also noticed fewer classic UCP actors—such as human rights defenders, lawyers, conflict monitors, and humanitarian and medical responders—in Rakhine, which can be attributed to the particularly strict access restrictions to parts of, and risks of working in, Rakhine since before the coup.

Challenges to UCP in post-coup Myanmar

The projects also recorded challenges to locally-led UCP under the current circumstances:

- Increased state surveillance under the SAC's military rule has increased mistrust, especially between members of different ethnic communities, which undermines social cohesion and makes protection efforts more difficult.

- The Myanmar case raises interesting questions about the delineation of key principles of UCP: (How) do civilians, who have taken up arms to resist an oppressive military regime and protect themselves and others from it, fit into UCP? How can UCP be built into a wider approach to social justice in this context?

- In Myanmar, UCP actors use proactive nonviolent strategies to protect civilians in a context where there is a widely shared lack of faith in a nonviolent end to the military rule. What is the longer-term role of UCP in this scenario, if it is not to create safer space to transform violent conflict nonviolently?

Policy Recommendations

Based upon our evidence from Myanmar showing that **local UCP can also be effectively used to protect civilians against high levels of state violence** such as those arising from an oppressive military regime where the space for international humanitarian action and response is shrinking, we recommend that the UN and its Member States:

1. **Recognize and support community-based, local unarmed civilian protection** because it is effective against state violence, which could include funding, training of local UCP actors, and ensuring that local organizations and communities' needs are addressed in international mechanisms. This includes developing efficient mechanisms to get resources directly into the hands of local UCP actors.

2. **Support local UCP actors** (e.g., organizations that offer train-the-trainer opportunities to spread UCP knowledge and skills) to foster the protection of civilians even in situations where military UN peacekeeping or other state-sponsored civilian protection approaches are unlikely or unfeasible.

3. **Integrate local knowledge** generated through community collaborative experience with protection from violence, as illustrated in the *Creating Safer Space* model, into national, regional, and global debates and remote support mechanisms for the protection of civilians under high levels of state violence.

Further information:

- Creating Safer Space website: https://creating-safer-space.com
- Creating Safer Space newsletter: https://creating-safer-space.com/contact/
- UCP Research Database: https://creating-safer-space.com/ucp-research-database/
- UCP/A Community of Practice website: https://www.ucpacommunityofpractice.org

Related publications & projects

- Bliesemann de Guevara, B., et al. (2022). 'Drawing Out Experiential Conflict Knowledge in Myanmar: Arts-Based Methods in Qualitative Research with Conflict-Affected Communities'. *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, 17(1), 22-41.
- Julian, R., B. Bliesemann de Guevara, and R. Redhead, 'From expert to experiential knowledge: exploring the inclusion of local experiences in understanding violence in conflict', *Peacebuilding,* 7(2), 2019, pp. 210–225.
- Julian, R., et al., *Like a Shady tree for Those in Trouble: Experiences of War and Hopes for Peace of People Living Amidst Violent Conflict in Kachin State, Myanmar*. Raising Silent Voices project brochure.
- Knowledge Hub Myanmar, 'Stories of Everyday Violence: Exploring Community Perceptions and Coping Strategies on Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar'. Findings Report, March 2024 (unpublished).
- Krause, J., and E. Kamler, 'Ceasefires and Civilian Protection Monitoring in Myanmar', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 2(1), 2022, ksac005.
- Project 'Exploring Community Perceptions and Coping Strategies on Violence in Rakhine State, Myanmar', part of the Creating Safer Space network.
- Project 'Raising Silent Voices: Harnessing local knowledge for communities' protection from violence in Myanmar', funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK.
- Project 'Scholars at Risk: Understanding vulnerability and violence faced by Myanmar refugee scholars in northern Thailand', part of the Creating Safer Space network.
- Project 'Understanding Changing Strategy and Practice of Civilian Protection Under a Military Junta: The case of Kachin and Northern Shan, Myanmar', part of the Creating Safer Space network.
- Project 'Understanding Community-level Spontaneous Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP): A Comparative Study of Initiatives in South Sudan, Myanmar and Colombia', part of the Creating Safer Space network.
- Project 'Increasing Resilience Among Peace Workers and Conflict Affected Communities in Northern Shan State', carried out by NP Myanmar with funding from USAID.

Our Research Network

Map labels:
- United States
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- United Kingdom
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- Cameroon
- Nigeria
- South Sudan
- Kenya
- Myanmar
- Thailand
- Philippines
- Indonesia

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Authors

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CREATING SAFER SPACE
STRENGTHENING CIVILIAN PROTECTION AMIDST VIOLENT CONFLICT

Creating Safer Space (CSS) is a 5-year, £2.25 million international research network, the biggest of its kind so far. We support research on unarmed civilian protection and self-protection amidst violent conflict and aim to strengthen civilian capacities for nonviolent protection and conflict transformation.

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