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# From Willingness to Participate in Street Demonstrations: Unpacking the Role of WUNC Elements in Myanmar's Anti-Coup Mobilization

**Abstract:** This article investigates the catalysts behind the significant social mobilization against Myanmar's military regime following the February 2021 coup. In response to the coup, the Burmese populace organized widespread peaceful protests and civil disobedience campaigns, united by their collective pursuit of restoring democracy. Leveraging data from the 2019 Asian Barometer Survey and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED), we examine previous instances of social mobilization against the military regime.

Applying Charles Tilly's mobilization theory, we explore how the WUNC (Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment) theory sheds light on the social mobilization of the Burmese people, with a particular focus on the pattern of peace demonstrations. Our findings reveal a crucial link between pre-coup commitment and subsequent peaceful street demonstrations.

Utilizing quantitative methods, we analyze the relationship between WUNC elements and the likelihood of individuals participating in social mobilization and actual street demonstrations following Myanmar's military coup. Our findings underscore the importance of social capital and liberal democratic values in moti-

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vating individuals to support democratic governance, even under Myanmar's challenging conditions.

In conclusion, we argue that by strengthening social capital and promoting liberal democratic values, the people of Myanmar may be more inclined to engage in peaceful street demonstrations to resist authoritarian rule. Our research contributes to understanding factors that fuel social movements against oppressive regimes, enriching the literature on social mobilization in Myanmar.

**Keywords:** Social Mobilization, Myanmar Military Coup, Mobilization Theory, Social Capital, Democratic Values, Quantitative Analysis, Barometer Survey

## Pripravljenost za sodelovanje v uličnih demonstracijah: razumevanje vloge WUNC elementov pri mjanmarski protidržavni mobilizaciji oziroma pri mobilizaciji protidržavnih demonstracij v Mjanmaru

**Izvleček:** Članek raziskuje katalizatorje za pomembno družbeno mobilizacijo proti vojaškemu režimu v Mjanmaru po državnem udaru februarja 2021. Kot odgovor na državni udar je burmansko prebivalstvo organiziralo obsežne miroljubne proteste in kampanje državljanske nepokorščine, ki jih je združilo skupno prizadevanje za ponovno vzpostavitev demokracije. S pomočjo podatkov iz raziskave Asian Barometer Survey iz leta 2019 in Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) preučujemo prejšnje primere družbene mobilizacije proti vojaškemu režimu.

Z uporabo mobilizacijske teorije Charlesa Tillyja smo raziskovali, kako teorija WUNC (Worthiness - Vrednota, Unity - Enotnost, Numbers - Število, in Commitment - Predanost) osvetljuje družbeno mobilizacijo mjanmarskega ljudstva, s posebnim poudarkom na vzorcu mirovnih demonstracij. Naše ugotovitve

razkrivajo ključno povezavo med predanostjo pred državnim udarom in poznejšimi miroljubnimi uličnimi demonstracijami.

Z uporabo kvantitativnih metod smo analizirali razmerje med elementi WUNC in verjetnostjo posameznikov, ki sodelujejo v družbeni mobilizaciji in dejanskih uličnih demonstracijah po vojaškem udaru v Mjanmaru. Naše ugotovitve poudarjajo pomen socialnega kapitala in liberalnih demokratičnih vrednot pri motiviranju posameznikov, da podprejo demokratično upravljanje, tudi v mjanmarskih zahtevnih razmerah.

Na koncu trdimo, da bodo ljudje v Mjanmaru morda bolj nagnjeni k miroljubnim uličnim demonstracijam, da bi se uprli avtoritarni vladavini, s krepitvijo socialnega kapitala in spodbujanjem liberalnih demokratičnih vrednot. Naše raziskave prispevajo k razumevanju dejavnikov, ki spodbujajo družbena gibanja proti zatiralskim režimom, s čimer obogatijo literaturo o družbeni mobilizaciji v Mjanmaru.

**Ključne besede:** družbena mobilizacija, vojaški udar v Mjanmaru, mobilizacijska teorija, socialni kapital, demokratične vrednote, kvantitativna analiza, raziskava barometra

## Introduction

In the early hours of February 1, 2021, a significant political shift occured in Myanmar, reconfiguring the country's complex socio-political landscape. The Myanmar military, known as the *Tatmadaw*, seized power, marking a decisive end to a decade-long quasi-democratic transition (Pedersen 2023; David and Holliday 2018, 179–198). This abrupt interruption came in the form of a *coup d'état* that resulted in the detainment of Myanmar's civilian leaders, including world-famous Nobel laureate Daw Aung San Suu Kyi. The military then declared a state of emergency, citing alleged fraud in the 2020 general election as a justification for their actions.

However, the Tatmadaw's return to complete authoritarian rule faced a swift and extensive backlash from the public. Across Myanmar, civilians took to the streets, enduring military crackdowns to protest the coup. This social upheaval involved widespread protests, civil disobedience campaigns, and general strikes. All these movements had one shared goal: to restore democratic governance. From doctors and teachers to students and civil servants, society showed unprecedented unity against the military regime (Farrelly 2021).

Despite the dangers and uncertainties, these collective actions continue, fuelled by profound resentment against the military regime and a shared desire for democracy. Understanding the catalysts behind this significant social mobilization is the main aim of this study.

Political sociologists have long analyzed social movements as complex phenomena from myriad social, political, and economic circumstances. Among the many theories developed to explain such actions, Charles Tilly's mobilization theory and the WUNC attributes (Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment) have been instrumental in advancing our understanding of social movements' emergence and their potential impact on political change (Tilly 1993, 1–5; 2004, 1–15). However, applying these theories to the unique context of Myanmar's anti-coup mobilization presents an uncharted research realm, the resolution of which has significant practical implications for Myanmar people.

The Burmese populace's resistance to the military coup has attracted global attention. Nevertheless, a comprehensive analysis of this social movement needs to be improved in current academic literature, especially in examining individual attitudes and behaviors and their collective expression. Moreover, this study addresses a critical gap in the literature on Myanmar's political develop-

ment, which has traditionally focused on elite politics and ignored bottom-up dynamics of political change (Prasse-Freeman 2012, 372–373; Farrelly 2023).

By applying Tilly's WUNC framework to the pre-coup and post-coup Myanmar context, this research hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the roots of anti-coup mobilization, especially the early street demonstrations across the country. Furthermore, we aim to underscore the influence of democratic values and social capital on the persistence of such movements.

This research may offer insights that benefit practitioners and policymakers by enhancing their understanding of the underlying motivations for social resistance. Such knowledge could contribute to the developing more effective strategies to support pro-democratic movements in Myanmar and other countries with comparable contexts.

In summary, this study explores the factors associated with the significant social mobilization against Myanmar's military regime following the February 2021 coup. Through an analysis centered on the WUNC elements, we aim to illuminate the correlations between an individual or aggregated attitudes and behaviors in the context of social movements. While we acknowledge the limitations in establishing direct causal mechanisms, our approach seeks to deepen the understanding of social movements' emergence and resilience in the face of autocratic backlash.

The article is organized in the following manner: Section two provides a background description of Myanmar's political situation and movements, and section three reviews pertinent literature on social mobilization and WUNC theory. Section four details our data sources and research methods. In section five, we share our findings and delve into their significance. Finally, the last section offers conclusions, highlights study limitations, suggests direc-

tions for subsequent investigations, and explores the potential impacts on future anti-authoritarian movements.

## Political Context and Social Movement in Myanmar

The political situation in Myanmar has been characterized by an enduring tension between democratic aspirations and the military's relentless pursuit of control, often leading to moments of robust social mobilization. The 2021 coup is an apt illustration of this pattern more than seven decades after the independence of Myanmar. After the National League for Democracy (NLD) won by a landslide in the November 2020 general elections, the Tatmadaw overthrew the elected government before convening the new parliament, declaring a state of emergency under the justification of election fraud (Huang 2022, 319; Lidauer 2023, 1).

Public discontent surged in the coup's aftermath, triggering unprecedented social mobilization against the military regime (Wah 2021; Williams, 2021). The ensuing demonstrations were characterized by diverse participation. This widespread resistance to the coup was organized under the banner of the *Civil Disobedience Movement* (CDM), which employed various strategies such as strikes, protests, and social media campaigns to voice their demands for a restoration of democracy (Ryan and Tran 2022, 2).

This social mobilization was not an isolated or spontaneous phenomenon but the culmination of years of deep-seated grievances against military rule in Myanmar. It was reminiscent of the *8888 Uprising*[2] in 1988, where millions of Burmese citizens took to the streets to demand an end to military dictatorship, and the

2 The 8888 Uprising was a major protest movement in Myanmar that began on August 8, 1988. It was driven by widespread discontent with military rule and economic hardships. The protests culminated in a violent crackdown by the military junta in September in the same year.

Saffron Revolution in 2007, led by Buddhist monks against the economic and political conditions under the junta (Lintner 1990, 1–12; Steinberg 2013, 2).

The *8888 Uprising* marked a significant shift in Myanmar's political landscape, culminating in the end of Ne Win's 26-year rule but leading to another military government – the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). This event saw the emergence of key figures such as Aung San Suu Kyi, who would later become the international symbol in the fight for democracy. On the other hand, despite being initially about economic conditions, the Saffron Revolution came to embody a broader struggle for political freedom and is indicative of the evolving strategies of social mobilization (Steinberg 2008, 220).

In both cases, the military regime responded with violence, resulting in a significant number of casualties and widespread international condemnation. Nevertheless, these movements demonstrated the potential for mass mobilization against the military regime and marked crucial moments in the country's enduring struggle for democracy. They also created a resilient underground civil society, provided a repertoire of contention, and nurtured democratic values that have persisted and informed subsequent resistances in various ways (Larkin 2005, 119–174).

The post-coup mobilization is distinguished by its ability to galvanize a broader cross-section of society, which is reflected by its 'cross-ethnic, cross-religion' feature to hold pressure against the military regime, which is never seen in previous anti-military movements (Dunford 2023, 159–160). We believe that this mass-scale 'cross-ethnic, cross-religion' unity can be understood within the framework of Tilly's WUNC attributes in our perspective, which provides a lens to examine the mechanisms driving this social mobilization (Tilly 1993, 1–5; 2004, 1–15; 2006, 298–306).

The WUNC theory suggests that social movements that display *worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment* have higher chances of success (Tilly, 1993, 21) and are more likely to gain public sympathy for recruiting more participants (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Bailey et al., 2023, 1210). Understanding Myanmar's political context and previous social mobilizations against the military regime guides us to examine the role of WUNC elements in the anti-coup protests. The experience and memories of past resistances have shaped the people's willingness to mobilize, their commitment to democratic values, and their capacity to remain united in the face of brutal repression.

In the following sections, we will delve deeper into this exploration, examining the application of Tilly's theory to the post-coup mobilization in Myanmar and probing how the WUNC elements may have spurred the citizens' willingness to action when the junta had once again ruined the democratic transition.

## Unraveling the Dynamics of Anti-Coup Mobilization in Myanmar with the WUNC Concept

Drawing on seminal works, social movements can be seen as a network of casual exchanges between a various individuals, groups, and organizations involved in political or cultural disputes bound together by a shared collective identity (Diani 1992, 3). Resource mobilization theory is a comprehensive framework that has been pivotal in understanding social movements. This theory suggests that the willingness of individuals to participate in social movements is influenced by the perceived costs and benefits of participation, shaped by both collective and selective incentives (McCarthy and Zald 1977, 1214; Klandermans 1984, 583).

Charles Tilly is one of the most influential advocates of mobilization theory, which focuses on the political aspects of resource mobilization (Tilly 1993, 1–5). He distinguished between 'mobili-

zation potential,' referring to a group's capacity to engage in collective action, and 'actual mobilization,' which denotes translating that potential into concrete action. The theory emphasizes the importance of human and material resources, organizational capacities, and opportunities for successful collective action (Tilly 1978, 1–11). According to Tilly, social movements are more likely to develop when three critical conditions coincide: a conducive political environment for collective action, sufficient resources and organizations to mobilize people, and shared interests and identities among participants. While these conditions create a favorable landscape for the development of social movements, it is essential to note that their presence does not guarantee the automatic formation of such movements. The realization of social movements depends on a complex interplay of these factors and additional situational and contextual elements.

As such, Tilly's contribution to mobilization theory provides a valuable lens to understand the dynamics behind social mobilizations. Further, Tilly proposed the WUNC attributes as crucial for effective social mobilizations. WUNC stands for *Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment*. According to Tilly (2004, 1–15; 2006, 298–306), a successful social movement is perceived as *worthy* when it demonstrates a righteous or virtuous cause. *Unity* indicates a shared identity and solidarity among the group members, compelling the cause. *Numbers* refer to the power in mass mobilization, reflecting broad support and participation. Lastly, *commitment* involves the willingness of participants to sustain the movement despite potential costs or risks.

Applying Tilly's WUNC concept, social movements aim to convince power holders and the public that they merit recognition and concession, possess the capability to challenge the status quo or defend their interests, and are resilient in the face of repression

or opposition. The emphasis on different WUNC attributes can vary based on the movement's goals, strategies, contexts, and audiences.

In analyzing the WUNC attributes within Myanmar's anti-coup mobilization, we find that while all elements are significant, the commitment of the movement's supporters emerges as particularly influential. Drawing from Bailey et al. (2023, 1213), we argue that this commitment represents a vital indicator of a movement's efficacy, as it exemplifies the supporters' readiness to take necessary actions to realize the movement's objectives. Though Tilly's framework does not prioritize any specific WUNC element, commitment plays a central role in Myanmar's unique political and historical context, functioning within a complex interplay of multiple factors influencing collective actions.

The term 'commitment' denotes the dedication of the movement and its participants. Social movements seek to showcase their commitment and willingness to endure hardships and risks for their cause. Thus, people's readiness to engage in political activities and confront potential risks reflects their commitment.

Nevertheless, such commitment is not without its risks. As mentioned, participants must be prepared to make sacrifices, particularly under an authoritarian regime such as Myanmar. Drawing on lessons from previous democratic movements in pre-Thein-Sein era Myanmar, participants often faced brutal oppression and lengthy prison sentences (Smith 1991, 1–26).

Given the notoriously harsh conditions of political prisons in Myanmar, coupled with widespread societal suffering under an oppressive political regime and a distrustful civil society, individuals must weigh the risks before participating in street protests (Fink 2001, 46–69; Larkin 2005, 119–174). Lessons from decades of democratic struggles inform this deliberation. The decision to participate in such protests signifies personal risk-taking and reveals an understanding of the potential ramifications for their families and

communities. Given these implications, the importance of commitment in social movements is further emphasized. Thus, we posit that people's commitment to social protest and their disregard for the associated risks will positively correlate with the frequency of street protests following the coup *(Hypothesis 1)*.

While worthiness, unity, and numbers are crucial to starting a robust social movement, the choice to act – the commitment – brings people's energy to the streets. Nevertheless, without the other three pillars – worthiness, unity, and numbers – citizens might not be determined to take to the streets. We believe that while worthiness, unity, and numbers may not directly predict the future scale of social movements, they undeniably reinforce people's commitment and determination to act when the time arises. First, we start with the worthiness of this movement.

In an anti-military dictatorship and pro-democracy movement, worthiness encapsulates participants' aspiration for democratic governance and their resistance to military rule (O'Donnell et al. 1986, 18–21). It represents not just citizens' assessment of a democratic government's legitimacy but also their alignment with liberal democratic values, thereby amplifying the rationale for anti-coup protests. Therefore, we posit that the perceived worthiness of democratic ways of life and a democratic regime will positively correlate with people's commitment to social protest *(Hypothesis 2)*.

Unity can be assessed by the level of social capital within a society, reflecting the connections and trust among its citizens, which lead to more effectively reaching collective goals and help sustain a democratic society (Newton 2001, 202–206). Unity also promotes internal harmony over discord within the community. Furthermore, a cohesive society with aligned mindsets can act cohesively without diversions. Such unity reduces the barriers to initiating collective action and diminishes the risks of isolated resistance, offering

a more secure basis for mobilizing collective action. Therefore, we posit that unity, as displayed by group cohesion and consensus (Bailey et al. 2023, 1210–1220), will positively correlate with people's commitment to social protest. *(Hypothesis 3)*.

The 'numbers' aspect refers to the anticipated size of participation before individuals join public demonstrations. Typically, people estimate the potential magnitude of these events based on past experiences and their sense of how many others hold similar views. Consequently, the attendance at previous demonstrations and the proportion of neighbors with congruent political positions can be key reference points. Thus, our final hypothesis regarding the 'numbers' dimension suggests that the number of previous protests in surrounding regions will positively correlate with the number of street protests following the military coup in Myanmar *(Hypothesis 4)*.

In summary, Tilly's mobilization theory and the WUNC framework offer the essential theoretical foundation for our study. By connecting these theories with our empirical data, we seek to decipher the intricate dynamics of social mobilization against Myanmar's military regime. Our goal is to elucidate the correlations between democratic values, social capital, past experiences, and the determination of Myanmar people and their influence on participation in street demonstrations.

In the following section, we outline our data sources and methods. We detail how we operationalized the WUNC concept and measured how the Burmese populace exhibited these traits in their social mobilization against the military regime, utilizing nationwide survey and event-count data.

## Data and Methodology

To shed light on the complex processes driving social mobilization against Myanmar's military regime, we utilized various data

sources, including the 2019 Asian Barometer Survey (ABS) and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED). By integrating these datasets, we examined the relationship between the WUNC elements and the likelihood of social mobilization from both micro and macro perspectives.

ACLED is a comprehensive project dedicated to conflict data collection, analysis, and crisis mapping (Raleigh et al. 2010, 651–652). Founded by Professor Clionadh Raleigh of the University of Sussex in 2005 and initially part of her PhD work, ACLED has evolved into a non-profit, non-governmental organization incorporated in Wisconsin, USA, since 2014. In 2022, it broadened its scope globally, now collecting and disseminating real-time data and weekly updates on events worldwide. It has documented over one million individual global events.

Project ACLED offers current information on various political violence and protest events in developing countries, including Myanmar. This provides a detailed view of event locations, involved actors, fatalities, and event types. Data is sourced from diverse channels such as media reports, humanitarian agencies, and local partners, capturing specifics on event dates, locations, actors, fatalities, and types. Our analysis mainly focuses on the 'demonstrations' and sub-events labeled as 'protests' within the ACLED dataset.[3] These are defined as public gatherings where participants

3 ACLED collects data on political disorder, capturing six primary event types: Battles, Explosions/Remote violence, Violence against civilians, Protests, Riots, and Strategic developments, and three types of disorder: political violence, demonstrations, or strategic developments. Each main category is divided into 25 sub-event types for a more granular analysis. Specifically for our study, we are utilizing the data about 'demonstrations' within the 'disorder type' category and 'protests' from the main event categories to underpin our analysis. Further details and classifications can be found in the ACLED Codebook and the Event Definitions Primer (ACLED 2023).

are unarmed and abstain from violence, even if violence might be directed towards them.

We filter events occurring in Myanmar from February 1, 2021, to April 30, 2023, encompassing the first two years of the coup and subsequent social mobilization. Additionally, we assess events from 2010 to February 1, 2021, dividing them into three distinct periods: Pre-reform era, Thein-Shein administration, and NLD administration, to test our hypothesis regarding 'numbers.' To fully leverage the dataset, we aggregate the events by the abovementioned periods[4] and state/region, yielding a panel dataset capturing street demonstrations' temporal and spatial variations.

Besides event count data, we also rely on survey data for our quantitative analysis. ABS is a valuable cross-national tool that gauges public sentiment concerning democracy, governance, and political culture across 15 East and Southeast Asian countries (Chu et al. 2020). The ABS was established in 2000 to assess public confidence in democracy across Asia and highlight the importance of public belief in democratic legitimacy for the success of democratization processes. From 2000 until 2023, the ABS has been co-hosted by the Institute of Political Science at Academia Sinica and the Institute for the Advanced Studies of Humanities and Social Sciences at the National Taiwan University in Taipei.

The fourth and fifth iterations of the ABS, conducted in 2015 and 2019, included Myanmar, with each survey encompassing approximately 1,600 respondents nationwide.[5] This survey provides

4 Pre-reform era (before 2011), Thein-Shein administration (2011-2015). NLD administration (2015-2021), Post-coup (December 1, 2021 to now).
5 Notably, while each ABS survey typically targets approximately 1,600 nationwide respondents, sample sizes can vary due to fieldwork conditions. Specifically, the 2019 survey in Myanmar resulted in a final sample size of 1,627 respondents.

an insightful snapshot of the Burmese populace's perspectives before the coup.

Using the ABS data, we construct distinct indices representing the elements of WUC (worthiness, unity, and commitment). These indices are derived from responses about support for democracy,[6] trust in others, and inclinations toward political engagement, including potential sacrifices for political movements. As the crucial individual-level variables in our research, these indices help elucidate the societal mobilization against Myanmar's military regime. The items and operationalizations used to measure each element of WUNC are detailed in Table 1 below:

6 Traditionally, the most commonly used set of questions for cross-national surveys to measure the level of public democratic support in a country is the 'three choices' format (Claassen 2020, 121). This format involves inquiring whether individuals believe democracy is always the best system, whether authoritarian regimes are sometimes preferable, or if they cannot discern the superiority of either system. However, due to variations in people's understanding of the 'democracy' concept, significant differences exist between authoritarian and democratic nations, casting doubt on the validity of this approach in authoritarian states. Hence, compared to direct measurement, we argue that indirect measurements, such as assessing whether people endorse a value system of freedom (Nathan 2020, 158–161), their understanding of democratic operational models (Schedler and Sarsfield 2007, 642–644), and the extent of opposition to specific authoritarian regimes (Foa and Mounk 2016, 11–14), can more accurately gauge citizens' democratic support within the context of authoritarian systems. Given the multifaceted nature of democratic systems, different democratic political bodies may operate differently, but political freedom remains the foundation of all democratic political processes. Therefore, we believe that individuals' identification with political freedom will better indicate their preference for a democratic system than direct questions about democratic support. In this paper, we employ a set of ten questions to measure individuals' support for core principles of liberal democracy, such as political equality, freedom of association and speech, checks and balances, and judicial independence.

Table 1: Questionnaire items and operationalization used for variables

| WUNC element | Measurement Item in ABS | Operationalization |
|---|---|---|
| *Worthiness*: Liberal Democratic Values | Q146: Women should not be involved in politics as much as men.<br>Q147: The government should consult religious authorities when interpreting the laws.<br>Q148. People with little or no education should have as much say in politics as highly-educated people.<br>Q149. Government leaders are like the head of a family; we should all follow their decisions.<br>Q150. The government should decide whether certain ideas should be allowed to be discussed in society.<br>Q151. Harmony of the community will be disrupted if people organize lots of groups.<br>Q152. When judges decide important cases, they should accept the view of the executive branch.<br>Q153. If the government is constantly checked by the legislature, it cannot possibly accomplish great things.<br>Q154. If we have political leaders who are morally upright, we can let them decide everything.<br>Q155. If people have too many different ways of thinking, society will be chaotic. | Summing up the frequencies of 'agree/strongly agree' responses for each question and form a composite score that ranges from zero to ten. |
| *Worthiness*: Diffuse Regime Support | Q86. Over the long run, our system of government is capable of solving the problems our country faces.<br>Q87. Thinking in general, I am proud of our system of government.<br>Q88. A system like ours, even if it runs into problems, deserves the people's support.<br>Q89. I would rather live under our system of government than any other that I can think of. | Summing up the frequencies of 'agree/strongly agree' responses for each question and form a composite score that ranges from zero to five. |
| *Worthiness*: NLD Supporters | If you vote today, which party would you vote for? | Respondents who answered NLD are encoded as 1, while the rest are encoded as 0. |
| *Unity*: Social Group Participant | Q18. We have listed various types of organizations that many people belong to. Could you identity the three most important organizations or formal groups you belong to? | Respondents who have participated in any group are encoded as 1, while the rest are encoded as 0. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| *Unity*: Trust Most People | Q22. General speaking, would you say that "Most people can be trusted" or "that you must be very careful in dealing with people"? | Respondents who chose 'Most people can be trusted' are encoded as 1, while the rest are encoded as 0. |
| *Commitment*: Will go or have already attended a demonstration or protest march | Q79. Attended a demonstration or protest march. | Respondents who selected 'Have done it before' and 'I have not done this, but I might do it if something important happens in the future' are encoded as 1, while the rest are encoded as 0." |
| *Commitment*: Will take or have already taken risky action for a political cause | Q80. Taken an action or done something for a political cause that put you in a risk of getting injure. | |

Regarding the aspect of 'Worthiness,' we employ 'Liberal Democracy Values,' 'Diffuse Regime Support,' and whether one supports the NLD as the primary variables of use. The reason is that even before the coup, Myanmar's political system was not entirely democratic, yet a majority of the population could accept such a political arrangement (David and Holliday 2018, 46–74). Therefore, apart from supporters of the ruling party and individuals with higher liberal-democratic values, we also refer to the variable construction methods from existing research (Huang et al. 2013, 158–160). We use 'diffuse support' for the regime as an operational definition of endorsing the existing system (Lu and Dickson 2020, 678–681), considering it as one aspect of 'Worthiness.'

Regarding the 'Unity' aspect, we expand the discussion to encompass social capital. We operationalize this by examining whether individuals participate in any social groups and whether they trust the majority of people in their society. For the 'Commitment' measure, we consider whether individuals are willing to, or have already, participated in demonstrations or protest marches. We also assess if they would disregard their safety for political reasons.

Furthermore, we incorporate sociodemographic variables, such as generation, gender, ethnicity, and affiliation with Buddhism, as control variables. In Myanmar, religion and ethnicity significantly influence the political landscape, citizenship, and nation-building processes. Buddhism, the dominant religion, along with the idea of 'national races' dramatically impacts the nation's political norms and ideologies (Cheesman 2017, 461–462). Moreover, the ethnic diversity, which includes 135 officially recognized ethnic groups, adds to the intricacy of Myanmar's politics and society (South 2008, 27–46).

Furthermore, we recognize that foreign researchers cannot access real-time public opinion in Myanmar following the coup and the decline in social liberties. However, the fifth wave of the Asian Barometer Myanmar survey was conducted in 2019, just before the onset of the global pandemic and the 2020 election. This gives us a unique chance to assess the attitudes of the Myanmar populace during the final moments of democratic reform. Moreover, we contend that the ACLED data offers a reliable proxy for measuring actual post-coup street demonstrations, as it draws from multiple sources and undergoes expert verification.

Our analysis employed quantitative methods to identify patterns and correlations within our selected datasets. Firstly, we connected the aggregated micro-level survey data from ABS with the macro-level ACLED data at the state and region levels. Through correlational analyses, we aimed to explore the relationship between WUNC indicators from the 2019 survey data and the actual instances of political violence and protest events in 2021. This approach enabled us to test our first and fourth hypotheses and to obtain a holistic view of the social mobilization in Myanmar, transitioning from pre-coup individual sentiments to post-coup tangible actions.

Next, to test hypotheses two and three, we utilized multilevel linear and logit regression models with a fixed-effect approach, given the vast regional disparities across Myanmar. This allowed us to account for the variability at the regional level, which would be lost in a simple pooled regression analysis (Gelman and Hill 2006, 1–12). Our dependent variables included measurements of citizens' propensity to engage in social mobilization, such as attending demonstrations or taking action for a political cause that will put them at risk (the *commitment*).

In the multilevel models, the individual and area-level elements of worthiness and unity – served as independent variables – were kept in their original form for the linear regression models. At the same time, the individual-level responses for the commitment to social movements were transformed into binary variables for the logit model.

By adopting this dual-level approach, we aim to surpass the constraints of strictly macro or micro perspectives, offering a more comprehensive and nuanced insight into the social mobilization against Myanmar's military regime. In the following section, we share our findings and discuss their implications.

## Findings

This study examines the relationship between people's pre-coup commitment to demonstrations or taking action despite risks and the number of post-coup street demonstrations across various periods. Pre-coup commitments are aggregated by state/region to align with the similarly aggregated ACLED indicators. Subsequently, Pearson correlation coefficients are computed between each pair of variables, spanning all states/regions in Myanmar.

Table 2 displays the correlation matrix between the level of pre-coup commitments and the counts of demonstrations across dif-

ferent periods. While the two types of commitment vary in degree, they are strongly correlated. Furthermore, our findings suggest that citizens' commitment to demonstrations in 2019 did not correlate with the number of demonstrations during the previous Thein Sein Era or the subsequent NLD administration period. However, there is a significant correlation with the number of protests in each state/region after the coup.[7] In contrast, the commitment to more aggressive actions shows no correlation with the number of demonstrations. Scatter plots with fitted lines are presented in Figures 1 and 2; the letter markings denote anonymized codes for different states/regions. Given a small sample estimate with only 15 observations, such a significance level is relatively uncommon. As a result, our macro-level findings partially validate the assumptions of our first hypothesis.

Table 2: Correlation analysis of macro variables: The effects of Commitment and Numbers

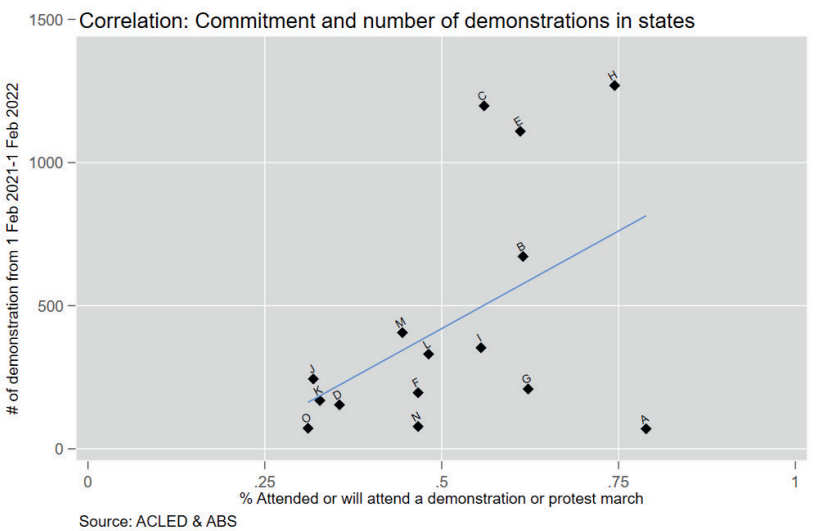
| | Commitment to demonstration or protest march | Commitment to risky action for a political cause | # Thein Sein Era | # NLD Era | # Coup to coup anniversary | # Coup anniversary to 2022/5 | # Coup to 2022/5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Commitment to demonstration or protest march | 1 | | | | | | |
| Commitment to risky action for a political cause | **0.7814**$^{***}$ | 1 | | | | | |

7 The correlation analysis using another event count, 'protests,' from ACLED, is entirely consistent with the results of Table 1 in terms of significance. This reflects the relationship in ACLED, where 'protests' is a subset of 'demonstration.' Therefore, the results of this correlation analysis are not shown here.

| | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| # Thein Sein Era | 0.3394 | 0.143 | 1 | | | | |
| # NLD Era | 0.3898 | 0.1569 | **0.9655**$^{***}$ | 1 | | | |
| # Coup to coup anniversary | **0.4833**$^{*}$ | 0.2118 | **0.7691**$^{***}$ | **0.7248**$^{**}$ | **1** | | |
| # Coup anniversary to 2022/5 | **0.488**$^{*}$ | 0.247 | 0.3478 | 0.2307 | **0.699**$^{***}$ | 1 | |
| # Coup to 2022/5 | **0.5261**$^{**}$ | 0.2467 | **0.629**$^{**}$ | **0.5456**$^{**}$ | **0.9377**$^{***}$ | **0.9039**$^{***}$ | 1 |

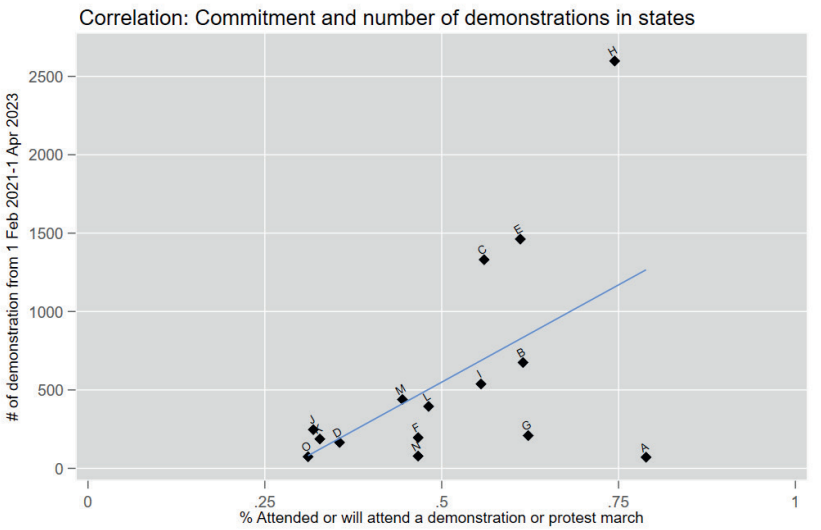
Note: *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 1: Correlation between percentage of people willing to attend a demonstration and actual demonstration count (1 Feb 2021 - 1 Feb 2022)




Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); www.acleddata.com. & Asian Barometer Waves V dataset (Myanmar), www.asianbarometer.org.

Figure 2: Correlation between percentage of people willing to attend a demonstration and actual demonstration count (1 Feb 2021 - 1 Apr 2023)




Source: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED); www.acleddata.com. & Asian Barometer Waves V dataset (Myanmar), www.asianbarometer.org.

Beyond our first main hypotheses, at a macro level, we also find that the more demonstrations there were in a region *before* the coup, the higher the number of demonstrations in that region in the year *after* the coup. This observation aligns with our fourth hypothesis. While this effect lost its significance a year after the coup, it still underscores the influence of the 'numbers' element in the WUNC theory in Myanmar.

We subsequently investigate how the WUNC elements influence respondents' willingness to participate in political demonstrations and their readiness to undertake risky actions individually. Table 3 displays the outcomes from three multilevel regression

models. Model 1 employs a fixed-effect logit regression to gauge willingness to attend a demonstration. In contrast, Model 2 assesses the inclination to take action for a political cause, even if it poses personal risks. The coefficients for each variable are also graphically represented in Figure 3.

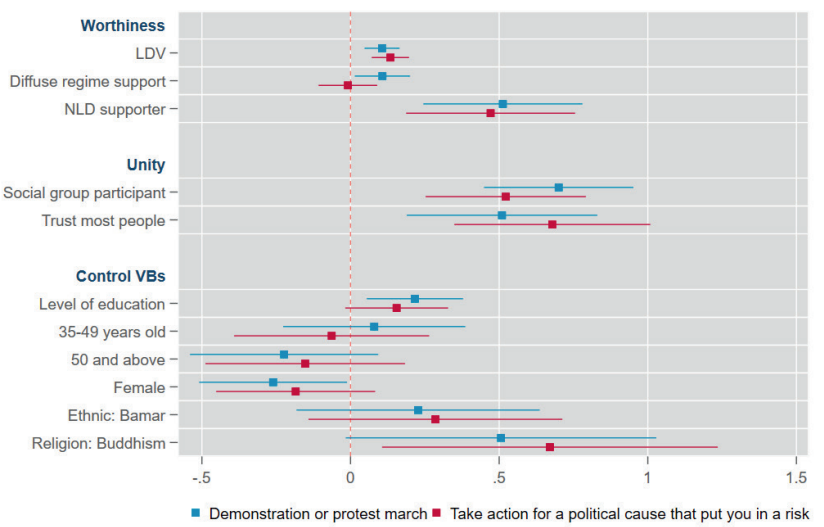
Table 3: Regression model: The impact of Worthiness and Unity on the two types of Commitment to political movement

| | (1) | (2) |
|---|---|---|
| | Attended a demonstration or protest march | Taken an action or done something for a political cause that put you in a risk of getting injured |
| LDV | 0.106*** | 0.134*** |
| | (3.53) | (4.19) |
| Diffuse regime support | 0.107* | -0.00892 |
| | (2.26) | (-0.18) |
| NLD supporter | 0.512*** | 0.471** |
| | (3.75) | (3.25) |
| Social group participant | 0.700*** | 0.522*** |
| | (5.47) | (3.80) |
| Trust most people | 0.510** | 0.679*** |
| | (3.12) | (4.04) |
| Education level | 0.216** | 0.155 |
| | (2.62) | (1.76) |
| 35-49 years old | 0.0798 | -0.0635 |
| | (0.51) | (-0.38) |
| 50 and above | -0.223 | -0.153 |
| | (-1.38) | (-0.89) |
| Female | -0.261* | -0.185 |
| | (-2.05) | (-1.35) |
| Ethnic: Bamar | 0.227 | 0.286 |
| | (1.09) | (1.31) |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Religion: Buddhism | 0.506 | 0.671* |
| | (1.90) | (2.33) |
| State-level Constant | -0.0229 | -0.300 |
| | (-0.11) | (-1.29) |
| Observations | 1627 | 1627 |

t statistics in parentheses
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Figure 3: Logit model coefficients for 1) willingness to attend a demonstration or protest march and 2) taking action for a political cause that put you in a risk




Source: Asian Barometer Waves V dataset (Myanmar), www.asianbarometer.org.

In the first model, we discovered that the variables capturing elements of 'Worthiness' – specifically 'LDV,' 'Diffuse regime support,' and 'NLD supporter' – are all significant. These variables, representing people's attitudes toward democratic governance and the

legitimacy of the incumbent NLD administration, act as positive predictors for attending a demonstration or protest march.

In the second model, which concerns the willingness to take action for a political cause regardless of the associated risks, both 'LDV' and 'NLD supporter' remain significant. However, 'Diffuse regime support' does not significantly predict the dependent variable in this model. This suggests that public support for Myanmar's semi-democratic political system is not robust enough to drive their willingness to take political actions despite potential risks.

The variables 'Social group participant' and 'Trust most people' represent the 'Unity' element of the WUNC concept in both models. Both are significant predictors for attending demonstrations and taking risky actions for a political cause. This suggests that individuals who are more socially involved and have a greater trust in others are more inclined to participate in collective political actions.

Regarding the control variables, factors such as age, ethnicity, and religion influence the dependent variables to varying extents. In the second model, Buddhism emerges as a significant predictor (coefficient 0.661, $p<0.05$), implying that Buddhists might be more likely to take risky actions for a political cause. This is consistent with the long-term influence of religion on the Myanmar political landscape (Cheesman 2017, 477) and the observations of increased riots against military rule after the coup, especially in the Burmese heartland (Pedersen 2023, 41–45).

These interpretations align with and extend the principles of Charles Tilly's mobilization theory, incorporating the WUNC (Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitment) concept. Our findings suggest that individuals' sense of worthiness and unity significantly influences the commitment to engage in collective actions, whether peaceful protests or risky political gatherings.

Our results show that the elements representing Worthiness and Unity exert positively and significantly affect Commitment. This suggests that respondents with higher levels of worthiness and unity are likelier to participate in or support political and risky actions. These findings serve as robust empirical evidence that validates Hypotheses 2 and 3 of this study.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the factors influencing participation in post-coup demonstrations against Myanmar's military regime, utilizing Charles Tilly's WUNC theory as a conceptual framework. The findings spotlight the pivotal roles of Worthiness, Unity, and Commitment in driving individuals to resist the military junta. Moreover, this study unveils that prior experience of rallying against a quasi-military regime markedly bolsters the likelihood of individuals engaging in street protests once more, observed at the State/Region level.

Our investigation into the WUNC elements within Myanmar's social movement against military rule offers vital macro and micro insights. At the macro level, our analysis furnishes compelling evidence affirming our hypothesis: pre-coup commitment levels are positively associated with the extent of post-coup street demonstrations. Specifically, the correlation matrix delineates a robust positive link between the aggregated willingness (commitment) recorded in the 2019 survey data and the counts of post-coup demonstrations in 2021 across various states and regions.

Our findings bolster prior research emphasizing the pivotal role of commitment in social mobilization. For example, McAdam (1982, 16–19) posited that the degree of commitment to a cause is a fundamental determinant of the persistence and intensity of social movements. Similarly, Klandermans (2004, 373) argued that the depth of commitment explains why individuals maintain their involvement in

social movements, even in the face of potential risks and hardships.

Furthermore, our analysis yields significant insights by applying multilevel regression models. Notably, our data shows that liberal-democratic values, social capital (as indicated by association and general trust), and support for the National League for Democracy (NLD) all positively correlate with individuals' commitment to attend a demonstration and to 'take action or done something for a political cause that put you at a risk of getting injured.'

These findings resonate with the work of scholars such as Norris (2002, 219–223), who stressed the vital role of social capital in fostering civic engagement and collective action, and Dahl (1989, 6–9), who articulated the fundamental role of democratic values in galvanizing social resistance against authoritarian regimes.

From the insights drawn through both our macro and micro analyses, it becomes evident that the WUNC elements are instrumental in shaping the social mobilization against Myanmar's military regime. The robust positive correlations between these elements and the willingness to participate in demonstrations indicate that they are not mere peripheral aspects of social movements; instead, they influence individuals' decisions to engage in protests following the violent overthrow of the democratic regime.

However, our study reveals that support for Myanmar's semi-democratic political system is insufficient to sustain the public's willingness to undertake risky political actions, as evidenced by the lack of significant predictive power of 'diffuse regime support' in our second model (David and Holliday 2018, 46–74). This finding accentuates the intricate dynamics fuelling social mobilizations against military rule in Myanmar, emphasizing the necessity for a nuanced understanding of the multifaceted factors at play.

Moreover, our findings echo prior research, suggesting that social movements are more likely to succeed when they mobilize

broad-based support, maintain unity among participants, and effectively embody all elements of the WUNC framework (McAdam et al. 2001: 148; Bailey et al. 2023, 1210–1212). These findings resonate with recent developments, such as the alliance between the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and Ethnic Resistance Organizations (EROs) in their contestation of land and political authority with the Tatmadaw (Dunford 2023, 159–182; Jolliffe 2023, 125–126). Such alliances may foster the potential for a successful revolution that incorporates more diverse voices across the country and promotes more democratic forms of governance.

Despite its insightful contributions, our study has notable limitations. First, due to constraints in the available data, we could not directly measure certain WUNC elements – specifically, Numbers and Commitment – at the individual level.

Second, our study relied on cross-sectional data, which limits our ability to establish causal relationships. Employing longitudinal data that tracks changes in the WUNC elements and participation in social mobilizations over time would address this issue more effectively.

Nevertheless, even amidst this bleak period for civil liberties, we are optimistic that future research could still significantly benefit from more comprehensive survey data, including measures of WUNC elements. Based on our analysis of the Myanmar people's unwavering opposition to the military regime, we maintain that survey research, including longitudinal studies, will continue to be viable in Myanmar's future landscape.

Through this study, we understand that bolstering citizens' democratic consciousness, fostering stronger connections between individuals and their communities, and providing more opportunities for people to demand their rights empowers them to rise in defense of democracy during times of crisis. However, it has also highlighted the complexity of these dynamics and underscores the need for fur-

ther, more comprehensive research to deepen our understanding of social movements against authoritarian regimes. The people of Myanmar are actively seeking to reclaim the democratic governance they rightfully deserve, and we remain steadfast in our commitment to monitor their progress and support their cause.

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