

Stigmatising narratives in military-controlled Myanmar

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The situation in Myanmar since the military coup on 1 February 2021 has been characterised by severe repression and systematic stigmatisation of all opposition. The military has deployed extensive propaganda campaigns to delegitimise and criminalise dissent, or even the presumption of dissent, particularly targeting those who exercise their rights to peaceful assembly and association. This report aims to inform the UN Special Rapporteur's thematic report by providing a detailed analysis of the negative narratives propagated by the military, their impacts on civil society, and recommendations to counter these harmful narratives.

Emergence of stigmatising narratives in Myanmar

In the aftermath of the coup, the military has employed various derogatory narratives to undermine and discredit the opposition including civil society organisations, human rights defenders, media outlets, journalists, protesters, organised labour, political activists, and political movements. These stigmatising narratives spread disinformation, incite violence, and rally public support for the military. They include labelling the opposition as "terrorists," "extremists," and "traitors." The military has specifically targeted groups promoting democracy, human rights, labour rights, and ethnic minority rights, as well as journalists and international organisations operating in Myanmar.

These stigmatising narratives extend to specific individuals and groups who are vocal in their opposition to the military. Notable figures, including Aung San Suu Kyi, the National League for Democracy (NLD), and the newer National Unity Government (NUG), have been smeared with accusations of corruption and sedition, intended to erode public support and justify the detention of their members.

Stigmatising narratives also apply to public movements. For example, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a prominent, peaceful, and only partially organised group focused on withdrawing labour in protest against the coup, has been repeatedly labelled as a terrorist organisation by the military. Similarly, ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) and their civilian supporters have been branded as insurgents and separatists, aiming to fracture the unity of the country.

Main actors and pathways of disseminating stigmatising narratives

The primary actors generating and spreading stigmatising narratives are the military themselves and military-controlled actors such as government departments, the state media, and the military's nationalist allies. They generate and disseminate the stigmatising narratives using media, social media, and in physical public spaces.

“Media” propaganda outlets

Digital media, newspapers, television channels, and radio stations directly controlled by the military, and some controlled by their allies, have been instrumental in disseminating propaganda full of stigmatising narratives about the opposition. State media, such as MRTV, regularly broadcast content that vilifies opposition figures and praises the military's efforts to maintain order. These media outlets have been pivotal in trying to shape public perception and reinforce the military legitimacy.

Social media

Platforms like Facebook, Telegram, and TikTok have been exploited by the military and its supporters to spread stigmatising narratives via disinformation, incitement to violence, and rallying calls for public support for the military regime. Online, fake accounts and bots linked to the military spread disinformation and troll and dox activists, creating an atmosphere of fear and confusion. Some platforms, such as Facebook, have somewhat invested in trying to stop the spread of stigmatising narratives, and others, such as Telegram, have done nothing. Even those limited efforts have done little to address the large and dynamic sources of military narratives.

Nationalists

Ultra-nationalist organisations have played a significant role in spreading stigmatising narratives including xenophobic and anti-democratic narratives, both online but also offline in physical spaces across the country. They have often collaborated with the military to organise counter-protests and violent actions against peaceful demonstrators. Pro-military groups and nationalist organisations have particularly amplified the military's negative narratives, in an attempt to further polarise public opinion.

Impact on civic space and public participation

The stigmatisation of Myanmar opposition has had profound consequences for civic space and public participation.

Restrictive Laws and Policies

The military has unlawfully “enacted” and enforced draconian laws to suppress dissent, such as the “amendment” of the Penal Code to include broad definitions of “fake news”, incitement, and sedition, and the “amended” Counter-Terrorism Law to criminalise opposition groups and their legitimate activities. This broad and vague legislation has facilitated mass arrests and lengthy detentions without trial, effectively silencing many voices of opposition and impinging greatly on any of their attempts to organise in response to the coup.

Violence and intimidation

The stigmatising narratives have justified the use of excessive force against opposition groups and individuals, resulting in widespread human rights abuses, including unlawful killings and torture. The military-controlled security forces have used live ammunition, rubber bullets, and tear gas against demonstrators, leading to numerous fatalities and injuries. They have also detained many thousands of the opposition, arbitrarily handing out significant terms of imprisonment for legitimate acts.

The military’s rhetoric has also emboldened pro-military allies and vigilantes, who have attacked opposition supporters with impunity. These groups have targeted individuals within their homes and workplaces, further contributing to a climate of fear and repression.

Chilling effect

The fear of being labelled a “terrorist” or “extremist”, with all the repercussions, will likely have deterred many individuals and organisations from openly or in secret participating in opposition to the military or engaging in advocacy work, leading to a significant decline in public participation and civic engagement.

Many civil society organisations have had to suspend their activities, fearing retribution from the military. The stigmatisation may also have affected funding and support for these organisations, as some individual and institutional donors may have become wary of being associated with groups branded as extremists by the military, for fear that the donor may become stigmatised by association.

Groups commonly subjected to stigmatising narratives

Political opposition

Opposition political activists and leaders have been primary targets of the military’s stigmatising narratives, portraying them not as democratic advocates but as threats to national security. Aung San Suu Kyi and leaders of the new National Unity Government (NUG) have been subjected to relentless character assassination with dubious charges, including corruption and sedition, aimed at discrediting their leadership and undermining their political influence. The military’s

propaganda portrays them as agents of chaos and foreign interference, and the principal threat to national stability and economic development.

Ethnic minorities

Marginalised groups, including ethnic minorities, LGBTIQ+ persons, and women, have been disproportionately affected by the stigmatising narratives. The junta's propaganda often targets these groups with specific derogatory terms and accusations, further marginalising them and justifying their exclusion from public life.

Ethnic minority communities have been particularly vulnerable to the military's stigmatising narratives. In regions like Kachin, Shan, and Rakhine, the military has used counter-terrorism rhetoric to justify brutal crackdowns on ethnic armed groups and their civilian supporters. This may have exacerbated ethnic tensions and hindered efforts for future peace and reconciliation.

For instance, in Rakhine State, the Rohingya community has faced long-standing persecution, which has intensified under the military. The military's propaganda has depicted the Rohingya as illegal immigrants and terrorists, justifying ongoing military operations and severe restrictions on their rights.

Women

Women's rights organisations have faced dual stigmatisation, being portrayed not only as political dissidents but also as disruptors of traditional gender roles. This may have led to more targeted harassment and violence against women's rights defenders, impeding their ability to organise and advocate for gender equality.

Women participating in the civil disobedience movement and other protests have been subjected to gender-specific violence, including sexual harassment and assault. The military's propaganda often targets these women with sexist and misogynistic rhetoric, aiming to undermine their credibility and deter their activism.

Journalists

Journalists and media workers have been systematically targeted by the military's negative narratives. Independent journalists who report on human rights abuses and anti-coup protests are often labelled as traitors and accused of spreading fake news. This has led to numerous detentions and even killings of media personnel.

The military has also shut down independent media outlets, raided news offices, and revoked media licences. Journalists who continue to work face constant threats, both from the authorities and from pro-military groups, significantly limiting the free flow of information.

Civil society organisations

CSOs have faced severe restrictions due to stigmatising narratives labelling them as terrorist supporters and foreign agents. Many have had to operate clandestinely or relocate their operations to neighbouring countries to avoid persecution. This has significantly hampered their ability to provide services, advocate for rights, and mobilise communities. This scarcity of resources has forced many CSOs to scale back their activities, reducing their impact and reach.

The stigmatisation has also affected cooperation and engagement with authorities. CSOs that were previously able to work with local governments on development projects and humanitarian aid are now viewed with suspicion and hostility. This has disrupted vital services, including healthcare, education, and food distribution, exacerbating the humanitarian crisis in the country.

Conclusion

The spread of stigmatising narratives against opposition to the military and its coup poses a severe threat to human rights and democratic governance. The international community must join with opposition stakeholders to take decisive action to support the resilience of Myanmar's civil society, counter the harmful narratives propagated by the military, and promote an environment where the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and association can be fully realised.

Recommendations

- Continue to apply **sustained diplomatic pressure** on the military to respect human rights. This includes condemning abuses in international forums, supporting UN resolutions, engaging in bilateral and multilateral discussions, and implementing targeted sanctions against military leaders and entities responsible for human rights abuses. Sanctions should focus on limiting the military's ability to finance and perpetuate violence, including against marginalised groups.
- Provide resources and support for the **systematic documentation and advocacy** on human rights abuses. This includes support for international mechanisms, for CSOs, training for activists, and platforms for sharing information internationally.
- Increase and strengthen **humanitarian assistance** for individuals affected by the stigmatising narratives in Myanmar. This includes funding for shelters, healthcare, and psychosocial support, as well as the offer of asylum and refugee support for stigmatised individuals fleeing persecution.
- Help **counter stigmatising narratives** by supporting independent domestic media, including financially and through training and capacity-building, as well as civil society organisations acting on behalf of at-risk communities and ideas.