

The "Spring Revolution" beyond borders: Transnational education and political activism among CDM students in Mae Sot

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Abstract: *This article examines the political, educational, and everyday practices of Myanmar Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) students who relocated to Mae Sot, Thailand, after the 2021 military coup. While existing scholarship has focused on professional CDM actors or formal organisations, this study centres on student activists whose contributions have often been marginalised. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork and interviews in Mae Sot, the article shows that students' political engagements did not end with displacement but were reconfigured across borders. The article argues that CDM students emerge as active political actors engaged in protest participation, medical support, financial redistribution, educational labour, and bureaucratic work within exile political structures. Through cases such as Amelia, Kinlay, and Pho Cho Lay, it illustrates how students navigate overlapping roles as resistance members, educators, caregivers, workers, and aspiring international students. These practices reveal exile not as political suspension but as a site of continuous mobilisation. A central contribution lies in rethinking partial citizenship in Mae Sot. Rather than treating it as a fixed legal status defined by documents such as pink cards, the article shows how partial citizenship is actively constituted through everyday political, educational, and care-based practices. By teaching, providing medical support, redistributing resources, and participating in exile governance, CDM students transform legal precarity into a basis for transnational political practice.*

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This study forms part of my doctoral dissertation and received approval from the Institutional Review Board of Seoul National University (IRB No. 2510/004-020). All interlocutors provided informed consent for their interviews to be used in this publication. To ensure confidentiality and reduce risks, all names and identifying characteristics have been anonymised.



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1. Introduction

On 1 February 2021, following the Myanmar military's declaration of a coup, citizens resisting the regime began to carry out the "Spring Revolution" through various forms of action, including protests and demonstrations, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), and participation in the People's Defense Forces (PDF). As the military arrested, detained, tortured, and killed resisting civilians, many have increasingly crossed borders to escape violence. This study focuses on the transnational education and political activism of CDM students who have migrated to Mae Sot, Thailand.

In Myanmar's history, student political participation has played a significant role, and Mae Sot has long functioned as a site of political exile (Lintner 1989, 196; Lintner 1999, 356; Katsiaficas 2012, 141). Nevertheless, since the 2021 coup, large numbers of students have participated in the CDM, and as the political crisis has continued for more than five years, its patterns have become increasingly complex. In particular, the conscription law introduced in 2024 has led to a growing number of students migrating to Mae Sot. Accordingly, there is an increasing need to analyse this expanding population of Myanmar student exiles.

Existing studies on transnationalism have largely focused on economic migrants with relatively stable legal status, while cases concerning education and political activism within transnational practices remain somewhat limited. Even when compared with recent cases of transnational student movements in other countries, Myanmar CDM students in Mae Sot occupy a distinctive position due to their precarious legal status alongside their engagement in transnational education and political activism. Because most previous studies have primarily emphasised political activism, there has been little discussion of how these student activists continue their education after migration. Whereas existing transnationalism literature tends to focus on transnational practices emerging after migration, this paper also explores how transnational practices formed prior to migration influence their migration, education, and political activism, as well as the interactions among these processes.

The primary research participants are 12 CDM students who migrated to Mae Sot, Thailand, following the 2021 Myanmar coup. Their main characteristics are as follows: eight are female and four are male, with female students comprising the majority; at the time of the coup, nine were university students, two were high school students, and one was a diploma student; seven are in their twenties, four in their teens, and one in their

thirties, and all had participated in the CDM. At the time of the coup, eight resided in Yangon, one in Mandalay, two in Magway, and one in Bago.

The research methods consist of in-depth interviews and participant observation conducted between October 2025 and April 2026. For the interviews, Korean–Myanmar interpretation was provided when necessary, or interviews were conducted in English. The researcher transcribed the Korean- and English-language portions of the recordings and cited key interview materials in this study. All research participants are identified using pseudonyms to ensure safety and protect personal information. Participant observation was conducted, to the extent possible, in everyday settings such as participants' homes, activist organisations, hospitals, markets, restaurants, and teashops.

The main research questions are as follows. First, why and how did Myanmar CDM students migrate to Mae Sot? Second, how did they enact transnational education and political activism before and during migration? Third, how are their transnational political practices connected to and reconfigured across the home country, host country, and third countries? Based on these questions, this study examines how Myanmar CDM students sustain the transnational everyday lives, education, and political activism they had already developed prior to migrating to Mae Sot. In doing so, this study aims to contribute to discussions on transnationalism and student political movements.

2. Literature review and theoretical framework

2.1. *Student-led transnational political movements*

"Transnationalism" refers to the ties and interactions that connect people and institutions across national borders (Vertovec 2009, 2). Existing studies on transnationalism have primarily focused on the economic, political, and cultural activities that migrants engage in toward their home countries after migration (Glick Schiller et al. 1995, 54–59; Glick Schiller and Fouron 2001, 356; Robertson 2021). Even when political activism has been examined, most studies have centred on limited forms of rights-based struggles, such as demands for voting rights in the home country or resistance to racial discrimination encountered in host countries (Robertson 2013; Noh 2021).

The subjects of transnational practices have also largely been migrants with relatively stable legal status, including permanent residents, citizens, and international students who migrated primarily for economic reasons. However, transnational migrants with increasingly diverse legal statuses are becoming more common (Alvarez et al. 2016; Campbell 2018; Chae 2014; De Genova 2005; Lee 2016; Phattharathanasut 2024; Robertson 2021). Nevertheless, there has been little research on the political activism of exiles or migrants with precarious legal status, making further investigation necessary.

Discussions of students as agents of transnational practice have also been relatively limited. In particular, students have often been portrayed primarily as elites pursuing economic advancement (Castles and Miller 2009, 161–62). More recent scholarship, however, has begun to highlight students as actors in transnational political movements (Chachavalpongpun 2025; Nielsen and Luescher 2026; Phattharathanasut 2024). Most of these studies focus on international students with stable student status who engage in political activism through connections to developed countries. Yet emerging forms of connection between developing countries also deserve attention as a new transnational dynamic.

In most cases of student-led transnational political movements, education itself tends not to be considered part of political activism. Education and political activism are often discussed separately, or political activism is emphasised while educational practices are largely overlooked (Chachavalpongpun 2025; Nielsen and Luescher 2026; Phattharathanasut 2024; Robertson 2013). However, education can itself function as a form of transnational political activism, and in this process, transnational solidarities and practices may be strengthened and reconfigured. This aspect therefore deserves closer attention.

Whereas discussions of transnationalism and transnational political activism have largely focused on practices emerging after migration, this study examines transnational political activism among Myanmar students beginning before and during migration itself. Most of these students are exiles who fled for political reasons, continue political activism while hoping to return to their homeland, and thus constitute political subjects shaped by exile (Coser 1984, 3; Edinger 1956, vii; Shain 1999, 389–94). Moreover, even before crossing borders and throughout the migration process, they maintained connections with the host country through various networks, and they have tended to continue their political activism after migrating to Mae Sot. In addition, because their educational practices function as a form of resistance against the state, this study also explores education as a component of transnational political activism.

2.2. *The “Spring Revolution” and the transnational practices of CDM students*

In the history of political movements in Myanmar, students have consistently emerged as key political actors (Hong and Kim 2019, 209; Lintner 1989). During the current “Spring Revolution,” many students also took leading roles in political activism and, as a result, migrated across borders to escape military violence. Historical records indicate that many students who led the 1988 Uprising and the Saffron Revolution migrated to ethnic minority autonomous areas near the border and to Mae Sot, Thailand (Lintner 1989, 196–198; 1999, 50). However, there are few records concerning their lives after migration to Mae Sot. Existing

studies have mainly focused on the transnational activism that unfolded after these exiles migrated onward to third countries via Thailand (Banki 2006; Hong and Kim 2019, 213–14; Kim 2018), or on political activism conducted after their eventual return to Myanmar (Ryu 2017).

Although most studies on Mae Sot have focused either on migrant workers in general or on the Karen population (Campbell 2018; Decobert 2016; Lee 2016), some studies provide clues regarding the political activism of exiles. One example is the story of Cynthia Maung, a Karen doctor from the 88 Generation who founded the Mae Tao Clinic (Decobert 2016; Lee 2016). Nevertheless, there is little documentation of how the majority of Burman exiles themselves carried out transnational political activism centred on their homeland while living in exile.

Research on political activism following the 2021 coup has also largely focused on developments within Myanmar itself (Hong 2022; Jordt et al. 2021; Maber and Ei Thin Zar 2025), while some studies have provided limited examples of transnational political activism conducted from host countries through connections with both the home country and third countries (Lee 2022; Lee 2024a; Lee 2024b). However, such cases inevitably differ in both scale and character from the forms of transnational political activism centred in Mae Sot. Even studies that introduce transnational political activism and everyday life in Mae Sot tend to focus broadly on exiles in general, the CDM as a whole, or teachers in particular (Banki 2025; Jirattikorn 2023; Kim et al. 2024). As a result, there has been little sustained attention to the youth who have actually led the movement. Even when youth are discussed, the focus has largely remained on young people inside Myanmar rather than those in exile (Hong 2022).

Furthermore, previous studies have rarely examined how education can function as a tool of resistance for students whose studies have been disrupted. Some scholars have mentioned the need to explore the “pedagogical” significance of Myanmar’s student political movements (Hong and Kim 2019; Maber and Ei Thin Zar 2025), yet detailed analyses remain limited. Accordingly, this study traces the process through which educational activities carried out by CDM students after migrating to Mae Sot come to be understood and practiced as forms of resistance.

In conclusion, this study focuses on the transnational political activism of Myanmar CDM students beginning even before and during their movement to Mae Sot. After arriving in Mae Sot and securing relatively more stable legal status, their educational and political activities expand through connections spanning the home country, host country, and third countries. In particular, this study examines how education, which had been interrupted by the coup, is resumed in Mae Sot and reconfigured as part of resistance.

3. The “Spring Revolution” and transnational political activism

3.1. *Transnational political activism originating in the home country*

Immediately following the declaration of the coup, students experienced intense feelings of anger and shock and began to participate actively in the “Spring Revolution.” The coup, abruptly declared amid the wave of political and economic reforms that had begun in 2011 and became more visible under the Aung San Suu Kyi-led government after 2016, pushed many people into political activism. The immediate disruptions caused by the coup – including internet shutdowns and electricity cuts – made people physically experience the reality of the coup and intensified a profound sense of having “lost their future.”

The case of Win Soe illustrates how a university student became involved in political activism after the coup and eventually migrated to Mae Sot as a result.

“I was university student, and a member of student union... Before the coup, our country has the future plans and education systems collaborating with other countries for better future... We don't like the military because they never good to the public and they looked only themselves. I participate strike and motivated and encouraged to participate other teachers in the CDM movement...I want to complete my education so I was willing to participate to continue the planning of the education for the CDM students, so support them as soon as possible... University council said ‘You should go to the Maesot for establishing transitional university ***’ because inside the Myanmar, Internet cut-off and safety for data and then...” (Win Soe, 4 November 2025)

During the course of political activism, Win Soe became connected with the National Unity Government (NUG) and sought information from people who had already arrived in Mae Sot, receiving assistance throughout the migration process. Even after arriving in Mae Sot, he continued supporting CDM students and professors inside Myanmar while maintaining close ties with the political community in Mae Sot. His determination not to abandon education after the coup expanded into supporting others, demonstrating how education itself could become part of resistance.

For some students, participation in political activism after the coup involved relocating to liberated areas, where they developed opportunities to build transnational networks. In Nadi's case, connections formed with resistance groups in liberated areas continued to shape her life even after crossing the border into Mae Sot.

"I'm trying to participate in the protests, it create a demonstration but it's difficult for me to get out of my house but for my parents are worry about me, for my safety. So that's why I think the best thing I could be able to do is like going into the liberated area. My services at that base for almost one year I think... At that time 2021 it's difficult for us to get the internet connection at that place at that area, it's hard for us to get the updated news... When I came to Maesot, I was introduced of the the leaders of the area *** (the revolutionary army) introduced... We were having mobile clinic activity supported by some organisation with the former *** member knowing by friends... I currently work for an (humanitarian aid) organisation and the head of the organisation is also a member of ***." (Nadi, 15 November 2025)

As a striking medical student, Nadi provided medical support within the resistance movement. She used medical knowledge acquired in Myanmar to support the revolution by training medics and transporting patients. Once she decided to cross the border and migrate to Mae Sot, the network centred around the resistance group began to function more actively. Through these networks, she gathered information during the border-crossing process and later participated in "mobile clinic" activities supporting medical care inside Myanmar through connections linked to the resistance army. She also gained access to information about her current humanitarian aid organisation through these same networks.

Shoon, who had been enrolled in a diploma programme, also relocated to a liberated area. While active in the PDF, she spent ten months in an ethnic minority region working as a medic.

"I attended a diploma course in ** University, and was also a manger in a company. After waiting for 72 hours, I joined the protests... All of the jobs and attending university stopped, and I participated in the revolution. I was a leader in the protest team, and one of the team member head shotted and passed away on the street in April, 2021... One of my friends made an arrangement to move to *** (the revolutionary army). I joined the training and started to work as medic." (Shoon, 8 January 2026)

Even after relocating to Mae Sot due to health problems, Shoon's political activism continued in modified forms, such as participating in civil society activities supporting local communities and later working for the NUG. Indirectly, her earlier involvement with the resistance army appears to have contributed to the development of her career within the provisional government. These forms of transnational political activism, initially formed in borderland regions, continue to shape the political activities of migrants in Mae Sot in diverse ways.

Whereas existing studies of transnationalism have paid relatively little attention to transnational practices prior to migration, the cases

of Myanmar CDM students demonstrate how transnational political activism can emerge within the home country even before migration occurs. Furthermore, the identity of these individuals as students at the time of the coup reveals that their education was not simply interrupted or resumed after the coup. Rather, education itself was reconfigured through participation in political activism and transformed into part of the broader resistance movement. The following section examines how their political activism was further transformed after being reconstituted in Mae Sot.

3.2. Transnational political activism toward the community

Some CDM students began to engage more actively in transnational political activism directed toward Myanmar after arriving in Mae Sot. In the process of gradually acquiring semi-legal forms of residence status, they reconstructed new forms of political activism. One notable feature is that the political activism emerging in Mae Sot became deeply connected to the local exile community itself. The case of Khine, who works in resistance media, illustrates this clearly.

“Before the coup, I was a normal university student and all the this happened when the military coup started. I involved with my school and protest, but my dad actively involved as a CDM leader in the government office, and got 505(a). We have to move to liberated zone first, and later arrived at Maesot... I was like illegal here, so don't really go out a lot (for the first time). Later I started to going around like attending workshop, training, I got a chance to learn journalism, and they made new media in border area. I had an internship for three months, and got offer from presenting at a media.” (Khine, 3 April 2026)

Khine now works as a broadcaster delivering news about Myanmar and international affairs. Through this process, audiences in the home country, host country, and third countries receive information in real time through media networks. Beyond media work itself, Khine also contributes to the community by participating in workshops and conferences, maintaining close communication with youth organisations, and helping operate educational programmes. In this sense, “political remittances” are not directed solely toward the home country but also actively shape the host-country community.

Like Khine, many CDM students who initiated transnational political activism connecting the home country and third countries after arriving in Mae Sot relied upon networks formed during both the coup period and the migration process. May is another example of a student who began engaging actively in transnational political activism after arriving in Mae Sot.

"I suggested by a teacher from my university, and started to work with NUG office when I arrive in Maesot. I assisted technical problems from them, and I worked with officers located in Korea one time... From that connection, I started to know more people in Maesot too." (May, 18 January 2026)

The CDM professor with whom May had remained in contact after joining the movement connected her to work with the NUG. Technical skills she had acquired through her university major before the coup became useful within the NUG, allowing her to support NUG members located in Korea and elsewhere around the world. In this way, skills developed during the reform and opening period prior to the coup became resources for carrying out the "Spring Revolution" after the coup.

Thus, the transnational political activism developed by CDM students after arriving in Mae Sot takes shape through media organisations, educational programmes, workshops, and conferences grounded in the exile community and its diverse actors. In this process, transnational political activism does not simply connect the home country, host country, and third countries; it also functions as a form of political engagement directed toward the host-country community itself. Particularly notable is that these political practices emerge through students' efforts to continue and reconstruct the education that had been interrupted in Myanmar.

4. Education as transnational political activism

4.1. "Education" as a means of resistance

Most CDM students resumed their education in various ways after arriving in Mae Sot in order to continue the studies disrupted by the military coup. In many cases, students who were unable to enter university or complete their university education enrolled in GED (General Educational Development) programmes through informal learning centres in Mae Sot or through online platforms.

Kyaw Kyaw and Ko Htun, respectively a CDM university student and high school student, arrived in Mae Sot due to their own and their families' involvement in political activism. The two met while studying in a GED programme at a learning centre and, after completing their examinations, eventually began working as GED teachers following a suggestion from an acquaintance they met by chance.

"When coup happened, I participated protesting. We held shields made out of town, in front of the citizens at protests. I went out daily and we share our lunch, dinner on the street. The military started shooting, and it was scary. I was teenager, and the adults prioritise us the teenagers first to

escape. 'Go first, you should go.' They shouted us.... I didn't fully graduate my school because I was going to take my matriculation exam...the military raided our house with trucks over 60 soldiers... We chose to go to liberated area first, and moved to Maesot after a year when the situation getting worse... After arriving in Maesot, I joined a learning centre and finished GED there. One day I was in a beauty salon here, and a teacher from a learning centre suggested me to join her school. I also suggested to Ko Htun to teach together." (Kyaw Kyaw, 24 March 2026)

The two now team-teach GED subjects in a small school established within a church. Most of their students, including Karen and Burman students alike, migrated to Mae Sot after the coup. The GED knowledge and English skills that Kyaw Kyaw and Ko Htun acquired both in Myanmar and later through learning centres in Mae Sot are now being passed on directly to other students. Their educational activities are therefore not limited to their own acquisition of knowledge but are transmitted to other displaced students who migrated to Mae Sot because of the coup.

In Ko Htun's case, after completing the GED programme, he went on to finish a university degree online and is currently preparing to study abroad.

"After the coup, I protested with my friends. The military started shooting and killing the people after three months. I stopped protesting and made a digital strike online with colleagues from majoring computer science. We should do for the military to stop that. It was Facebook page, and we post news. When people read it, we can donate the money to children in refugee camp... The military tried to find me, and I moved to Maesot with the information from a friend... I finished pre-GED, and GED course from learning centre, and had a chance to finish my bachelor in online environment. After that, I decided to apply master course abroad." (Ko Htun, 27 March 2026)

Although Ko Htun was unable to complete his university studies in Myanmar because of the coup, the computer skills he had developed there became useful during his political activism. The GED scores and online university degree he obtained after arriving in Mae Sot are now being used not only for his own future but also to support the education of other students displaced by the coup. In this way, CDM students' pursuit of education is deeply intertwined with post-coup political activism.

Cece, another CDM university student, has also continued teaching students and participating in educational activities after arriving in Mae Sot.

"Before the coup, I was a university union member. I heard the news that Daw Aung San Suu Kyi has detained, and I started to cry. I started to participate in protests, and one day I witnessed a student shot

by the gun in the university compound. I cannot protest anymore after that time... I had to move to forest and stay there for a while as a PDF member. When I arrived in Maesot, I started to teach online for English for children and youth as a member of youth organisation. Some of students are in Myanmar and also in Maesot. We also made children's library in our organisation." (Cece, 20 January 2026)

After arriving in Mae Sot, Cece continued her studies by taking GED courses while also participating in activities supporting the education of children and youth within the local community. In many cases, the political activism and educational activities of CDM students cannot be clearly separated, as they are deeply interconnected. At the same time, some educational activities remain linked to people inside Myanmar, thereby further facilitating transnational political activism.

4.2. Remigration and the continuation of political activism

Some CDM students, after obtaining GED qualifications or completing certain educational programmes, begin planning to relocate either to other regions within Thailand or to third countries in pursuit of better educational opportunities and improved living conditions. Nadi, for example, works for a civil society organisation in Mae Sot while simultaneously completing university courses online. Once she secures the necessary legal status, she plans to migrate to a third country in order to complete her education.

"I have been participating in the civil disobedience movement, and I had to stop my study in my university. So knowledge is limited and try to move to other places because I want to contribute more... I moved to Maesot then I try to take some online classes from university in Germany... But the extension for two years, so I was stuck in that stage... I try to move to Germany." (Nadi, 15 November 2025)

After arriving in Mae Sot, Nadi balanced both study and activism while attempting to resolve issues related to legal residency, including visas and passports. This was neither an easy nor simple process, requiring considerable money, time, and energy. Yet just as the coup and subsequent migration to Mae Sot did not extinguish her commitment to political activism and education, the process of planning and preparation continues.

Susu, who had been a CDM university student, moved to Phuket after resolving her residency status while making a living by teaching Korean in Mae Sot. Her purpose was to save money for future study in Korea. Because Phuket is a major tourist destination compared to Mae Sot, some exiles relocate there in order to earn higher incomes.

"After Covid pandemic, I attended online Korean class when the school stopped. when coup happened, I felt my dream became so dark. I started

to dream about studying and working in Korea when learning Korean, I did CDM, and participated the protest right away. I also volunteered for coordinating free riding for protestors. I did what I can do at that time... One day, the police visited my home to capture me. My bank account already freezed but I kept sending money to PDF at that time. I should escaped the country and arrived Maesot after staying at liberated zone a couple of days... I started to teach Korean at an organisation in Maesot.” (Susu, 13 November 2025)

The organisation where Susu taught Korean in Mae Sot provided free classes in various subjects to youth and members of the exile community. During her time in Mae Sot, Susu shared the foreign language skills she had developed in Myanmar with other members of the exile community. In doing so, she simultaneously supported students preparing for onward migration to Korea through Korean-language education while also preparing for her own future. This process lays the foundation for transnational political networks that may continue in third countries if both she and her students later migrate abroad.

5. Conclusion

Myanmar CDM students largely suspended their studies and became fully involved in political activism immediately following the military coup in 2021. Their participation was accompanied by intense anger and frustration over the collapse of the reform and opening process that had begun in 2011. The military’s application of collective punishment against family members also influenced their migration, while networks formed within Myanmar and across borders played an important role in providing the information necessary for migration to Mae Sot.

Most students arrived in Mae Sot through brokers without passports or visas and, after arrival, gained access to forms of “partial citizenship” (Pongsawat 2007) that had previously been associated mainly with migrant workers. In the process of acquiring legal status, they resumed educational opportunities that had been interrupted by the military regime. Through learning centres and online programmes, they pursued degrees while simultaneously engaging in political activism by transmitting the skills and knowledge they had acquired to members of the exile community. Throughout this process, networks connecting the home country, host country, and third countries became actively mobilised.

Cases of transnational political activism in Mae Sot also reveal close engagement with the exile community. Some students work for resistance media organisations in Mae Sot, broadcasting news back to Myanmar, while others share language skills and technical knowledge with youth within the community. These forms of “political remittances” are based

in the host country but remain simultaneously connected to the home country and third countries.

Students also tend to migrate gradually to other regions within Thailand or onward to third countries, and during this preparation process they often continue engaging in transnational educational and political activities. These practices anticipate and facilitate future remigration and political activism. If remigration occurs, their transnational political activism is likely to continue through networks connected to both Mae Sot and Myanmar.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to existing discussions of transnationalism and the political activism of Myanmar migrants. In particular, this study highlights students' transnational everyday lives and political activism as they emerge prior to migration and throughout the migration process, while being mediated through education and connected across the home country, host country, and third countries. One limitation of this study is that it does not examine cases of transnational political activism that continue after remigration. Future research will seek to address this limitation.

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