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The Political Economy of Education in Myanmar: Recorrecting the Past, Redirecting the Present and Reengaging the Future

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Abstract

Myanmar's education sector has been consistently starved of investments and resources for many decades. Episodes of political turbulence have brought frequent crackdowns on students, with resultant damage to the education system. Myanmar's 2021 military coup has had dramatic and adverse effects on education at all levels. Parallel educational systems — those of the coup regime, the rival National Unity Government, and ethnic organizations — now operate in Myanmar. The security of everyone involved in Myanmar's education sector is at risk. As Myanmar moves beyond rentier status, the future of the country's education sector will depend on forging an education sector compatible with diversity, access to modern technologies, and on educated Myanmar migrants in the diaspora.

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1. Introduction

Myanmar's educational institutions — and above all their students — have had a high profile in the country's affairs even before its independence from the British Empire. While the country enjoyed a reputation for its distinguished educational institutions under British rule, its education sector¹ has, however, suffered neglect for many decades.² The cycles of crisis that have defined Myanmar's politics since independence have coincided with the continued decline of the sector. Those cycles have cast a long shadow on education in Myanmar, causing 'lost generations' in human capital terms.

The 2021 military coup has exacerbated what was already a bleak picture in Myanmar's education sector. It will have a lasting impact on that sector, as thousands of educators from across the country joined the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). On top of that has been the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Future efforts to invest in education with the sector's longer-term economic sustainability in mind must serve the goals of economic transformation, federalism and, quite simply, higher-quality schooling for Myanmar's youth. Those efforts must take into account the country's ongoing transformation from a rentier state to a post-rentier economy, a transformation to which education will be crucial.

This paper provides a critical analysis of education in Myanmar in light of post-military coup and post-Covid-19 pandemics in the nation. It also demonstrates an important aspect of investment in the education sector towards an economic transformation that the country highly needs - from a rentier state to a post-rentier state.

¹ In this article, the term education is generalized and refers to the entire sector, from primary to higher education, unless used in passages with an explicit focus on just one part of the sector.

² Myanmar's education system has been chronically and severely underfunded for a long time, including under the NLD's government. Much research has demonstrated that "the education system is poor by any standard"; see Hayden and Martin (2013).

2. Education Amidst Political Turbulence

Myanmar's education sector has long been mixed up in the country's bitter political crises (see **Table 1**). University students took the lead in struggling for the nation's independence from Britain and played an instrumental role in forming the Myanmar military or Tatmadaw in their effort to accelerate the independence struggle.³ Since then, students have always been at the forefront of fighting for a better future for the nation. It is no surprise therefore that students have often taken to the streets demanding political change.

However, rather than recognizing the remarkable role that students have played in Myanmar's history, successive rulers of the country have chosen to see them as a threat. Military regimes have brutalized students in various ways, often violently.⁴

Student protests and regime brutality have been inseparable, with the 1988 Student-led Uprising⁵ exemplifying the brutalities that many students even today find hard to forget.⁶ Following a precedent set in 1974, the way that the authorities have ever since chosen to handle such crises is, by and large, to close down schools nationwide (Oo, 1993). Closures have not necessarily been associated with actual street protests; they have often been used to avoid 'potential protests'. For instance, when Myanmar was to become a member of ASEAN in July 1997, the month following the start of the Myanmar academic, all schools at different levels were closed for fear of student protests.⁷

³ For instance, General Aung San, founder of the Burmese army (now the Tatmadaw), was the president of the Rangoon University Students' Union and the All Burma Students' Union in the 1930s and -1940s.

⁴ In 2014-2015 students marched to protest the then draft Education Law, in what was perhaps the only instance in which students taking to the streets and marching from town to town in protest were not met with violent suppression. Indubitably, these marches were different from the more political pro-democracy protests in 1988 and the anti-junta protests after the 2021 coup.

⁵ For more details, see "As Myanmar Opens Up, a Look Back on a 1988 Uprising", National Public Radio, 8 August 2013 (<https://www.npr.org/2013/08/08/209919791/as-myanmar-opens-up-a-look-back-on-a-1988-uprising>).

⁶ For instance, Human Rights Watch called for justice for victims of the 1988 massacres, in which many students suffered; see "Burma: Justice for 1988 Massacres", Human Rights Watch, 6 August 2013 (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/08/06/burma-justice-1988-massacres>).

⁷ "Burmese Schools Closed", Associated Press, 17 June 1997 (<https://www.burmalibrary.org/reg.burma/archives/199706/msg00268.html>). Myanmar was admitted to ASEAN on 23 July 1997.

Table 1: Political Disturbances and their Impact on Myanmar’s Education

Myanmar’s political crises by years	School Closures
1958 – military coup	In 1958, Prime Minister U Nu transferred state power to military chief U Ne Win legally; this coup did not have an impact on schools.
1962 – military coup	In 1962, U Ne Win staged another coup but this coup did not have an impact on the academic year because it took place during the schools’ and universities’ long break.
1974 – U Thant Uprising (or U Thant Funeral Crisis)	Universities and colleges were closed for over six months
1988 – military coup after 1988 Student-led Uprising)	Universities and colleges were forced to close from 1988 to 1991.
1996	Several months of student unrest followed police beating of Yangon Institute of Technology students in October.
1997 – Myanmar’s controversial entry into ASEAN.	All state schools were closed for eight months, and universities and colleges were closed for more than one year for fear of protests.
2007 – Saffron Revolution	Students at universities and schools were forced to return home for several months.
2021 – military coup	One academic year (2020-21) was cancelled for all schools due to Covid-19. The military coup forced the education system to close down for another academic year (2021-22); most university students decided not to attend during the 2022-23 academic year; state schools have largely reopened.

Source: Data collected through various sources, including interviews with those involved in different political events.

Every coup, and indeed every episode of anti-military unrest, has marked a different generation of Myanmar people. University-student-led movements opposing the military are taken to define the generations that participate in them: the '74 Generation, the '88 Generation, the '96 Generation and so forth. Members of successive generations of the young in Myanmar have been unable to continue their studies or enter their desired professional fields. The result has been a constraint on their ability to contribute to the nation. In human capital terms, frequent closures of schools, colleges and universities have resulted in 'lost generations'.

In 2021, Myanmar confronted its fourth coup in seven decades of independence.⁸ While the coup has affected all of Myanmar's people, perhaps those hardest hit — and whose futures are most affected — are members of Generation Z (Gen Z),⁹ most of whose members are under 35 and are students. In general, this generation had had no previous direct experiences of coups; the most recent coup before this one, which crushed the historic student-led Four Eights (8888) Movement,¹⁰ took place in 1988 — fully 33 years earlier. The coup maker remains the same, however: the country's military. And Myanmar's return to military rule immediately gave rise to a question: who would lead the fight against the brutal coup makers? The answer has been, once again, young people or students.¹¹ But, rather than just another round of turbulence, last year 2021 was a watershed in Myanmar's political history.

This new generation has shown unique characteristics in battling the State Administration Council (SAC) junta. Thousands of teachers and educators also acted to resist the coup. They joined young people in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), thus forcing the schools at different levels to close down. Over 125,000 teachers have reportedly been suspended due to their involvement in the CDM movement.¹² Those involved in anti-coup activities believe that education under the military is a 'slave education system'.¹³ At the same time, in the second

⁸ There have been four coups – in 1958, 1962, 1988 and 2021, In the case of the military coup of 2021, a core pretext behind it was alleged election fraud, but there have not been any independent verifications of the claims.

⁹ Many believe that Generation Z is not necessarily defined by age, but rather that it concerns political understanding and involvement in the movement against the coup.

¹⁰ As its core movement was on 8 August 1988 or 8.8.88, many recognized this as the 8888 Movement or 8888 Student-led Uprising.

¹¹ The university students especially, formerly or currently involved in student union activities, have been at the forefront of the anti-coup activities including armed struggle.

¹² "More than 125,000 Myanmar teachers suspended for opposing coup", Reuters, 23 May 2021 (<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/more-than-125000-myanmar-teachers-suspended-opposing-coup-2021-05-23/>).

¹³ "Parents, Teachers, and Students Boycott 'Slave Education System'", *Frontier*, 6 May 2021 (<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/parents-teachers-and-students-boycott-slave-education-system/>).

year after the coup, some CDM participants rejoined school activities under the junta in order to earn a living. In fact, the SAC has pressured educators to go back to work.

3. The Coup of 2021 and Primary and Secondary Education

Even before the 2021 coup, Myanmar faced the problem of ‘a missing million’ in its state schools at the primary, secondary and high school levels.¹⁴ An Asian Development Bank (2015) report found that up to a million youths were exiting Myanmar’s education system each year without completing high school. These data reflect the fact that, of roughly 1.1 million new Grade 1 students each year, only some 110,000 progress through the system and eventually pass the matriculation examination. This leaves about a million youths each year with limited prospects for further education and training, or access to modern sector employment. Major reasons for high dropout rates are the affordability of education, a lack of interest in schooling and various family issues.¹⁵ As these data indicate, minimal investment in education at the state school level has had serious consequences. Despite the efforts of the previous National League for Democracy (NLD) government, there has been little progress in reforms in areas like curriculum design, facilities and teaching methodologies.¹⁶ All of these things require investment. And the failure to make such investments helps explain why Myanmar loses a million skilled workers each year.

Last year’s coup only deepened this crisis. Myanmar’s schools had already suffered from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. A UN aid agency reported that “children [were] the hidden victims of this pandemic” in Myanmar.¹⁷ The country’s first COVID-19 case was officially identified on 23 March 2020. Soon afterward, all schools were closed, in an effort to contain the virus.¹⁸ It has been reported that Myanmar’s schools remained fully or partially closed for 15 months.¹⁹ And the coup only brought a range of further disruptions to school activities. In

¹⁴ In other words, Grades 1-12 in state schools.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Soe San, “Beyond the Coup in Myanmar: Don’t Let the Light of Education Be Extinguished”, Just Security, 16 June 2021 (<https://www.justsecurity.org/76921/beyond-the-coup-in-myanmar-dont-let-the-light-of-education-be-extinguished/>).

¹⁷ United Nations, Myanmar (2020).

¹⁸ See Ministry of Education, Myanmar (2020).

¹⁹ Save the Children, “Myanmar: Number of Children out of Schools More Than Doubles in Two Years”, 1 June 2022 (<https://www.savethechildren.net/news/myanmar-number-children-out-school-more-doubles-two-years>).

the year following the military’s seizure of power, overall school enrolment levels fell tremendously, to a nationwide rate of only 10 per cent.²⁰ Schools have also faced serious security threats since the coup. Just in May 2021, when the new academic year usually starts, for instance, Myanmar saw attacks on 103 schools and other education facilities, in events related to SAC forces’ occupation of many school premises throughout the country.²¹

Now, according to SAC data, more than 3,000 teachers in state schools²² have returned to work even though many others are still reportedly participating in the CDM, teaching either in schools under the National Unity Government (NUG) or on their own. Those who returned are reportedly under watch for their activities. The 2022-2023 academic year has also seen higher student enrolment in state primary, middle and high schools than in the prior year.²³ More than 93 per cent — that is, over 5.6 million — of the total pool of over 6 million students registered in state schools for the 2022-23 academic year.²⁴ The SAC played up the increase in enrolment for this year as big news in a state media outlet, under the title “over 91% of students joyfully study at 3,207 schools in Yangon”.²⁵ It served as propaganda to show the country running ‘normally’ under the junta’s rule — and also as the latest reflection of the unrelenting politicization of education in Myanmar.

The state school sector is, however, only part of the story in post-coup Myanmar. The parallel government known as the National Unity Government (NUG) publicly announced the implementation of a variety of education programmes of its own. The NUG physically launched its activities for this school year in some ‘liberated areas’, lying mainly in Myanmar’s heartland regions of Sagaing and Magwe. It also launched several online educational activities.

²⁰ Myanmar Now, “Some 90 percent of Myanmar Students Refuse to Attend School under the Coup Regime, Teachers Say”, 26 May 2021 (<https://www.myanmar-now.org/en/news/some-90-percent-of-myanmar-students-refuse-to-attend-school-under-coup-regime-teachers-say>).

²¹ Save the Children, “Myanmar: More Than 100 Attacks on Schools in May”, 11 June 2021 (<https://www.savethechildren.net/news/myanmar-more-100-attacks-schools-may>).

²² “အလုပ်ပြန်ဝင်တဲ့ CDM ပညာရေးဝန်ထမ်းတွေ စောင့်ကြည့်ခံနေရ” [Those who return back from the CDM are under watch], Radio Free Asia Burmese, 21 June 2022.

²³ The levels of education in state schools are the three levels of Myanmar primary education (Grades 1-5), middle school (Grades 6-9), and high school (Grades 10-12).

²⁴ “Over 5.6 million students at school in Myanmar on second day of 2022-23 academic year”, *Eleven Media*, 5 June 2022 (<https://elevenmyanmar.com/news/over-56-million-students-at-school-in-myanmar-on-second-day-of-2022-23-academic-year>).

²⁵ “Over 91% of students joyfully study at 3,207 schools in Yangon”, *Global New Light of Myanmar*, 3 June 2022 (<https://www.gnlm.com.mm/over-91-of-students-joyfully-study-at-3207-schools-in-yangon/>). The author is not able to verify the statistics mentioned here.

Thousands of students have registered under the NUG's education system; this also amounts to a major development as Myanmar enters a new academic year.²⁶

In the meantime, the parents of students in both education systems worry about the safety of their children. Those who registered their children in the NUG's schools face the risk of being punished by the SAC regime in ways that include potential attacks on those schools. The headquarters of the popular NUG-affiliated online school known as 'Kaung for You' was recently raided by the military, and several teachers including its leadership were arrested.²⁷ Parents with children in schools under SAC authority also worry about punishment by the resistance forces. Security measures have been tight at schools across the nation, and in effect everyone involved in education during the 2022-2023 school year is at great risk. The safest schools are perhaps those located in territory controlled by well-established ethnic armed organizations, whose operations long predate the coup.

4. Higher Education Before and After the Coup

In contrast to apparent trends at the primary and secondary levels, Myanmar institutions of higher education sector still face very low enrolments for the second year in a row following the 2021 coup. Having comprised some of the best institutions in Southeast Asia under British rule, Myanmar's higher education sector²⁸ has been in free fall in the 70 years since the country's independence. Today, Myanmar nationals seeking to pursue quality higher education think about going abroad. Quality in-country higher education is hard to find, especially in state institutions. This situation largely means that only members of the wealthy classes are able to have access to quality education, while the rest of the population has to attend institutions of deteriorating quality.²⁹ Another issue is academic freedom. Some discussion during the period

²⁶ For instance, NUG has been trying to establish a parallel education system to derail the legitimacy of the junta while providing education services in various forms, including online. For more details, see "National Unity Government fights junta's slave education with plan to build parallel system", *Myanmar Now*, 10 May 2022 (<https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/national-unity-government-fights-juntas-slave-education-with-plan-to-build-parallel-system>).

²⁷ "Myanmar Junta Arrests Nine Teachers working for NUG online school", *The Irrawaddy*, 14 July 2022 (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-arrests-nine-striking-teachers-working-for-nug-online-school.html>).

²⁸ In this article, references to Myanmar's higher education sector concern more than 40 universities and colleges and more than 150 technical and vocational schools located across the nation. For more details see UNESCO (2013).

²⁹ There are exceptions of individuals educated abroad on various scholarships and awards who are not from wealthy families. However, their number is believed to be very low.

of NLD administration notwithstanding, Myanmar universities and colleges funded and managed by the state comply with government policy.³⁰ Since professors and educators are employed by the government, they need to adhere to the government's line. While science subjects may not be affected, the situation is very different for the social sciences and other fields. Political lectures and discussions have often been banned.³¹

A third issue is mismanagement in general. For instance, professors and educators at different school levels are often assigned duties taking care of campus premises and security measures including acting like security personnel at the gates.³²

The subjects taught and studied in Myanmar's institutions of higher education matter to the country's overall national development. Vocational training and linkages to the private sector have been largely absent, and the relationship of education to material success or even financial stability is hardly evident to students. Agriculture and livestock subjects are key to the nation's success, given the importance of its agriculture-based economy. Rice milling technology, critical to improving the quality of Myanmar's rice production and thus to increasing its value on world markets, is extremely outdated. Existing technologies are from the 1920s,³³ and there has been no tangible innovation since then. In the 2019-2020 academic year, the new subject of rice milling technology³⁴ was offered at some government technological colleges, but to date no one has yet graduated in that field in Myanmar. A second example is the study of peacebuilding. The country's higher education system offers no such programme, covering topics such as negotiations and conflict transformations, let alone making academic

³⁰ Myanmar implemented its Comprehensive Education Sector Review (CESR) in 2014. While the document calls for university autonomy, that has never been realized until now; see "Myanmar Comprehensive Education Sector Review, 2018 (<http://www.cesrmm.org/documents?fbclid=IwAR1AQndyvZ5IOhsFDkWDaC33xNrtlyQ7dhFeCdvCTQXbGaPm2DNG6RA4VMs>).

³¹ "Myanmar University Students Object to Government Controls on Campus Political Talks", Radio Free Asia, 30 May 2018 (<https://www.rfa.org/english/news/myanmar/myanmar-university-students-object-to-government-controls-on-campus-political-talks-05302018162309.html>).

³² For instance, Pakokku University's Teachers Union announced on 3 March 2020 that it was not in favour of the gate security assignments for teachers and would complain formally to the higher authority; see <https://www.facebook.com/1272067102901896/posts/2560295637412363/>.

³³ This conclusion draws on the author's conversations with farmers and rice millers in the course of his work.

³⁴ For instance, an undated article written by Dr. Myo Kyawe, "ကိုဗစ်အလွန် အဆင့်မြင့်ပညာဘာသာရပ်သစ်များ (၇)" [New Subject for Higher Education in Post-COVID-19 (7)], argues that Myanmar needs to introduce the subject of "agriculture engineering that includes i) farm machinery and farm mechanization, ii) farm structure engineering, iii) irrigation and drainage engineering, iv) farm surveying, v) biotechnology, vi) packaging technology and vii) milling technology; see <https://www.agri.com.mm/11071-2/>.

contributions to support the country's peace efforts. This is true even though the nation has faced the world's longest civil war.

The impact of last year's coup on this already deeply troubled system of higher education came on top of the year lost to COVID-19. The coup sent Myanmar's higher education sector into collapse. Many young people of university age involved in peaceful demonstrations against the coup became soldiers in the anti-coup and anti-junta Spring Revolution. They have reasoned that, as long as the country's military involves itself in politics, students need to involve themselves in politics, too.³⁵ Further, the SAC has stationed forces at campuses across the nation under the pretext of ensuring security, a serious violation of international law.³⁶ Many educators and university teachers have joined university students in being arrested or going into hiding for their involvement in activities in opposition to the junta. Very few remain actively engaged in undertaking their normal activities on Myanmar's campuses. The upshot is that higher education in Myanmar has been largely suspended.

5. The Future of Education in Myanmar

Even now, many Myanmar people are devoting themselves to planning for and working toward a better post-SAC Myanmar, despite the bleakness of the country's current situation. The education sector will figure importantly in that scenario, in ways related both to national unity and economic progress.

Forging compatibility with diversity

State schools in Myanmar use Burmese as a medium of instruction. However, nearly half of the country's population are not Bamars, but are rather native speakers of different ethnic languages.³⁷ For this reason, groups in some ethnic areas have set up their own schools, which they refer to as 'national schools'. For instance, there are over 130 Mon national schools across

³⁵ In his 1997 University of British Columbia doctoral dissertation on "The Politics of Authoritarianism: The State and Political Soldiers in Burma, Indonesia and Thailand", Chao-Tzang Yawnghwe discusses army involvement in politics and the idea of political soldiers; see <https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs14/CTY-thesis-Burma-Indonesia-Thailand.pdf>.

³⁶ There are several important international agreements against military occupation of schools; see "Protecting Schools from Military Use: Law, Policy, and Military Doctrine", Human Rights Watch, 27 May 2019 (<https://www.hrw.org/report/2019/05/27/protecting-schools-military-use/law-policy-and-military-doctrine>).

³⁷ Especially among people living in rural parts of ethnic areas, many do not speak Burmese at all.

Mon and Kayin States and in Tanintharyi Region; they enrol almost 20,000 students.³⁸ Ethnic groups' national schools largely lack support from the government, and are therefore outside its administrative or budgetary authority. They are largely supported by the ethnic armed organizations operating in their respective areas, and some are supported by the communities that they serve. Needless to say, these schools face many challenges, not least financial ones.

Myanmar's educational planning is very centralized. Recruitment processes, infrastructure development, and training are under the control of the Union government. Financial resources are in the hands of the Union, and so is the power. Even if a state or regional government has a better understanding of the on-the-ground realities of recruiting primary school teachers in the local context, the recruiting process goes up to higher levels of the educational bureaucracy. For education in ethnic languages, one would assume that ethnic state governments know best how to manage the issues involved and support such education. Without the decentralization of education planning, therefore, it will be hard to bring education to more of Myanmar's citizens. In the absence of investment in teaching ethnic languages, many Myanmar people will miss out on primary school and further education, since they are simply unable to speak Burmese. Respecting ethnic languages and cultures is important in federal education planning and in the broader program for federalism in a post-SAC, democratic Myanmar. The right to education is not just about learning opportunities but also about respect for the rights of the ethnic populations and their place in the nation-state.

Fostering modernization

An already broken education system - which was further damaged by the military coup, the COVID-19 pandemic and the dire economic situation - will require access to immense resources if it is to be repaired. The future of education in Myanmar depends on the significant resources associated with educated Myanmar migrants in the country's diaspora. These migrants have international educational exposure. They include the offspring of members of the country's middle and upper middle classes who are already sent abroad for school.

³⁸ "Mon National Schools to Open on June 1", BNI News, 27 May 2022 (<https://www.bnionline.net/en/news/mon-national-schools-open-june-1>).

Whether people in the diaspora return to contribute to the betterment of Myanmar one day also depends on government policies. Myanmar must develop and implement sound policies to encourage Myanmar expatriates to contribute to the rescue of the education sector. This is a vital part of the reconstruction process for the troubled nation.³⁹

The other area with potential is modern technology. Today's universities and colleges are in touch with every corner of the world through modern technologies. Myanmar's institutions must take advantage of this connectedness in developing quality education. This means that international cooperation in the education sector is of the utmost importance. Innovative reforms in the sector will enable Myanmar to catch up with the rest of the world.

Finally, the opportunities created by these changes must extend to the vast majority of people who live in rural areas, and whose access to quality primary and secondary education has been extremely limited.

6. Education in a Broader Perspective: From Rentier to Post-Rentier State

The repair of Myanmar's education sector must be effected with attention to the country's likely and needed economic transformation. While Myanmar has a wealth of natural resources, education has not enjoyed tangible investments of funds derived from these resources. In fact, the distribution of wealth has never been thought through from a political economy perspective in Myanmar. Oil, gas, gold and other minerals have contributed significantly to the country's foreign earnings. In the 2010-2011 fiscal year, earnings from these natural resources exceeded domestic tax receipts by a factor of three; they were of a magnitude sufficient to transform Myanmar's economy.⁴⁰ This condition made Myanmar a rentier state.⁴¹ Like many Persian Gulf states,⁴² it relied on the export of natural resources for much of its revenue. But, unlike the Gulf states, Myanmar has not made a 'rentier distribution' back to its citizens. This distribution is extremely important for a rentier state's eventual transformation to successful

³⁹ It is important to note that many of these expatriates are professionals; systematic arrangements to allow them to return to the country to use their expertise fully are required.

⁴⁰ See Turnell (2011).

⁴¹ A rentier state here refers to a state that derives most of its revenues from the exploitation of resources such as oil, gas, timber, and other minerals, including all extractive assets within its territory, rather than from the use of its human capital.

⁴² Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS), "The Politics of Rentier States in the Gulf", January 2019 (<https://pomeps.org/introduction-the-politics-of-rentier-states-in-the-gulf>).

post-rentier status. These natural resources are simply non-renewable, and so, from a long-term perspective, future generations will instead have to turn to other revenue sources.

Different rentier states adopt different investment strategies toward generations of their citizens who will live in post-rentier economies. Many Persian Gulf states have come to realize that fact and have initiated economic diversification.⁴³ For instance, one of most successful rentier states, Saudi Arabia, launched its ‘Vision 2030’ to reduce its dependency on oil and diversify its economy. This vision drives the huge public investments in education and tourism, as well as the healthcare sector.⁴⁴

Table 2: Government Education Spending, % of GDP – Myanmar vs. other rentier states

Sr.	Country	% of GDP	Reporting Year /Regions
1.	Myanmar	2.1	2019/ASEAN
2.	Brunei	4.4	2016/ASEAN
3.	Oman	5.4	2019/Gulf States
4.	Saudi Arabia	7.8	2020/Gulf States
5.	Kuwait	6.6	2020/Gulf States
6.	UAE	3.9	2020/Gulf States

Source: World Bank

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ For more details on Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030, see https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf.

For Myanmar, education for the future means much more than an improved learning environment. Besides fixing curriculum designs and entrenched rote learning,⁴⁵ it is about enabling the economic diversification that the country needs. Myanmar will soon earn the title of a failed post-rentier economy unless very significant changes are made now. Myanmar's natural resources have gradually disappeared and can no longer be relied on.⁴⁶ However, in the meantime, investments in human capital have been minimal. The military has, for instance, taken an outsized share of the state budget for many successive years, while critical sectors such as education, health, and agriculture have received low budget shares.⁴⁷ An example of the starvation of the system is Myanmar's monastic schools. Hundreds of monastic schools — primary schools and above — run by monks, nuns or other religious figures free of charge play a critical role in Myanmar's education system.⁴⁸ These schools fill a gap in an education system that has been seriously underfunded.

It is not overly dramatic to say that in the decades ahead, Myanmar's survival will largely depend on the skilled labour pool it can create and on the competitiveness of its people. Without skilled labour, industrial development is difficult. Without industrial development, economic diversification is hard to foster. In this regard, Myanmar needs to correct its spending patterns on education and realise the need for massive investments in that sector.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Zar Yar Lin, "Freeing the Teachers to Break Free from Rote Learning", *Myanmar Times*, 9 March 2017 (<https://www.mmmtimes.com/special-features/231-educentre/25294-freeing-the-teachers-to-break-free-from-rote-learning.html>).

⁴⁶ For instance, the production of one of Myanmar's major gas reserves, the Yetagun gas field, has declined, and it is reported that in January 2021 gas production from the field had fallen to as low as 12MMcf/day; see Eric Yep and Shermaine Ang, "Myanmar's Yetagun gasfield production halt to prop up Thailand's LNG imports", *S&P Global Commodity Insights*, 5 April 2021 (<https://www.spglobal.com/commodityinsights/en/market-insights/latest-news/natural-gas/040521-petronas-declares-force-majeure-at-yetagun-offshore-gas-field-in-myanmar>).

⁴⁷ For instance, even under the NLD-led government, in fiscal year 2018-19, the military took over 13.0 per cent of total spending for its defense budget, while education and health received 9.0 and 4.5 per cent, respectively; see That Nay Moe, "Govt to spend spend more on health, education; but funds for agri lacking", *Myanmar Times*, 12 October 2018 (<https://www.mmmtimes.com/news/govt-spend-more-health-education-funds-agri-lacking.html>).

⁴⁸ Sharon Run, "Monastic Schools: Filling a Gap in the Education System", *Frontier*, 19 August 2018 (https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/monastic-schools-filling-a-gap-in-the-education-system/?fbclid=IwAR2x0Qgdcys_06Zp6BGTRCjcnlscROhy1qDXMva-I36bbzOKrpPCevxMdF4).

⁴⁹ Myanmar's spending on education has been low for several decades; see World Bank, "Myanmar MM: Government Expenditure on Education: Total: % of GDP, 1972-2017" (<https://www.ceicdata.com/en/myanmar/education-statistics/mm-government-expenditure-on-education-total--of-gdp>).

7. Conclusion

The generations lost in every Myanmar coup have made the nation poorer. The 2021 military coup set the country back economically compared to other countries in the region. The coup worsened the brain drain problem. In addition, the deterioration in Myanmar's education system will cost the new generation their future by not being able to transition away from the rentier status through massive investments in the education sector.

The current crisis in Myanmar's education sector is severe. Myanmar needs to re-examine its education sector to foster a longer-term economic transformation to a post-rentier state. That will require addressing the problem of low investments in the education sector. In addition, the future of the sector also dependd on the outside world — on educated Myanmar migrants and modern technologies. National reconstruction following the current political crisis will depend to a great degree on the country's education policy — and on the associated actions implemented in practice. The citizens of Myanmar need this more than ever before.

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