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Amendment of the National Education Law and other language-in-education developments following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar

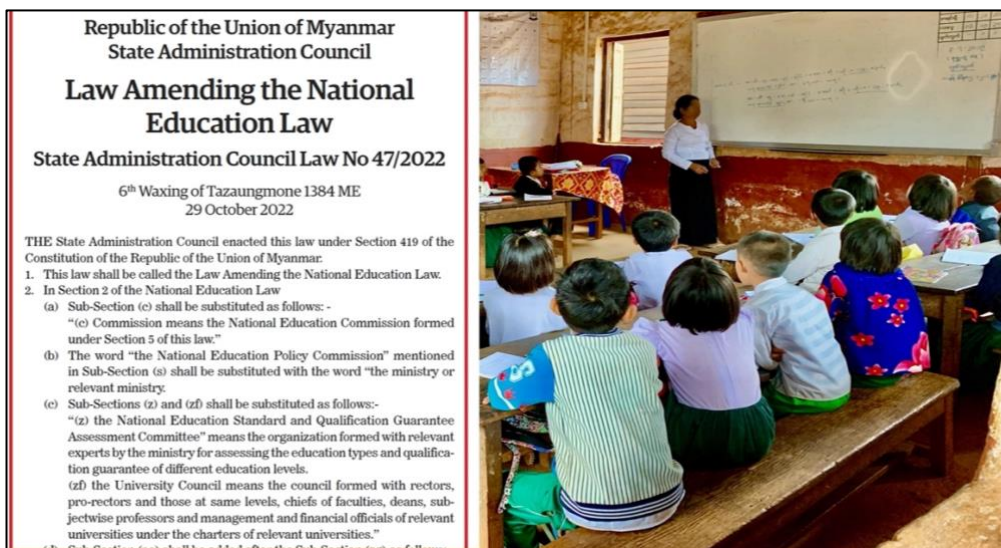
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Nicolas Salem-Gervais, Summer Aung, Amber Spreelung, Ja Seng, Jung Benatar, and Chan* outline the evolving language-in-education landscape following the coup, within and beyond military-controlled territory.

*Some authors used pseudonyms for security purposes.

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Education ranks high among the sectors most impacted by the 2021 military coup and its aftermath. Following a long history of involvement in Myanmar's successive political struggles, scores of students and school and university teachers have been at the forefront of the protests and subsequent resistance movements, notably the [Civil Disobedience Movement](#) (CDM). Choosing to participate in the revolution either with their chalk (“[မြေဖြူကိုင်ပြီးတော်လှန်မယ်](#)”) or trading it for a gun ([မြေဖြူကိုင်သည့် လက်မှသည်](#)

သေနတ်ကိုင်သည့် လက်အဖြစ်သို့), many have sacrificed their careers, their family life, their homes and even their lives to oppose the return of a military dictatorship.

To a greater extent than at any time in Burma/Myanmar's history, the education sector itself has become a battlefield. After two years of interruption in response to the Covid pandemic and the immediate repercussions of the coup, the State Administrative Council (SAC) has been attempting to reopen schools and universities, starting with the urban areas under its control. It has aimed for a return to "business as usual" despite an at least 40% drop in overall basic education student enrolments (the drop in matriculation exam enrolment, in 2022-23 as compared with 2019-20, is much steeper: around 83% according to official figures). Amidst the SAC's official declarations repeatedly asserting the role of schooling in the fostering of core military values, such as "patriotism" and "discipline", sending or not sending their children back to schools controlled by the military regime has been an extremely difficult choice for many, notably among low-income families.

In contrast, the National Unity Government (NUG) has been striving to set-up a parallel, pro-revolution and progressive-leaning education system, of federalist inspiration, in the regions controlled by the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) and other allied groups as well as online. In multiple instances, schools and education personnel have been struck by violent attacks by the military, and at times by other actors, resulting in injuries and deaths of both students and teachers, sometimes in unspeakable circumstances. Teachers working for NUG-affiliated schools have repeatedly been arrested, sometimes condemned to life sentences, and parents also risk prosecution under the Anti-Terrorism Act for enrolling their children in these schools. Predictably, these profound disruptions and climate of violence surrounding education often have disastrous consequences, including on children's mental health.

For many decades, Ethnic Basic Education Providers (EBEPs), which include some of the Ethnic Armed Organizations' (EAOs) education departments as well as other and newly formed organizations (see Part 2), have been providing education and relying to different

extents on their respective languages. In the post-coup context, the EAOs offer [diverse and potentially shifting political stances vis-à-vis the junta](#) and [the NUG](#). Some of the major organizations, including the [Karen National Union](#), [Kachin Independence Organization](#), [Karenni National Progressive Party](#), as well as the [historical and newly formed Chin groups](#), are currently in conflict against the SAC. These EAOs, among those sometimes referred to as Ethnic Resistance Organization (EROs), are [militarily aligned with the NUG](#) (in accordance with the federalist perspectives it has put forward), actively involved in education (but with diverse levels of actual collaboration with the NUG's Ministry of Education), and working to different extents with CDMers.

Major legislative steps backward

In this greatly disrupted context, where education is at the heart of battles between vastly different conceptions of the nation, the state and the society – and with the [2008 Constitution being void](#) as far as the NUG and allied groups are concerned, – the SAC amended the 2014-2015 National Education Law in [October 2022](#). This amendment entails, among other things, the nullification of articles allowing the formation of teachers and students' unions (section 4(c) which was added in the 2015 version of the law, following the 2014 students protests), and the modification of the composition and prerogatives of the National Education (formerly “Policy”) Commission (sections 5 and 6). In terms of language-in-education policy, many observers also did not fail to notice [major steps backward](#) at the basic education level, firmly condemning them as [evidence of the military's Burmese chauvinism](#).

Almost a decade ago, the promulgation of the 2014 National Education Law (which was amended in 2015) [sparked controversy](#) around several aspects of its content and was faced by [reiterated demands](#) for a [proper mother tongue-based multilingual education](#) (MTB-MLE) policy. Although debatable in many regards, these legislative developments were nonetheless part of a process, along with [UNICEF work and advocacy for multilingual](#)

education, to noteworthy steps towards including ethnic minority languages and cultures in government schools in the late 2010s through some extent of decentralization to the States and Regions and including the development of local curricula. Although implementation was often slow, imperfect, and contingent upon many factors, this framework offered the possibility to teach ethnic minority languages as subjects in government schools a few periods every week and to use them as “classroom languages” (oral media of instruction – different from MTB-MLE) when relevant.

The 2022 amendment to the National Education Law by the SAC, in addition to reducing the prerogatives of the regional governments in education (nullification of 49(f) granting them the freedom to administer educational matters), explicitly suppresses the possibility of using ethnic minority languages as “classroom languages” through the amendment of article 43(b), from:

*“If there is a need, an **ethnic language** can be used alongside Myanmar as a classroom language at the basic education level.”*

to:

*“**Myanmar language** shall be used as the classroom language at the basic education level.”*

Similarly, the amendment of article 44 unambiguously restricts the teaching of ethnic minority languages as subjects to the primary level (Grades 1-5), from:

*“In Divisions or States, teaching of ethnic languages and literature can be implemented by Division or State governments, **starting at the primary level and gradually expanding (to higher grades)**. ”*

to:

*“Learning ethnic literature and languages in regions and states shall be undertaken **at the basic education primary level** under the relevant region or state government.”*

These major steps back towards a more monolingual and monolithic conception of language-in-education policy potentially have two sets of consequences: not only do they

limit the usage of ethnic minority languages in government schools themselves, but they also hinder the possibilities of recognition and bridging with non-state ethnic education systems, which typically use their respective languages to a wider extent, as documented in several studies. Many non-state ethnic education systems are far from being on any kind of speaking terms with the military-controlled MoE at the moment, but some of the organizations which are not currently in open conflict may be wondering what the mid-to-long-term implications of such an amendment might be for them. This backwards shift in language inclusion must also be situated in the perspective of a national education system which does not seem on track to offer attractive perspectives in the foreseeable future, including in terms of the development of analytical skills and of recognition outside of Myanmar, while alternatives largely grounded in ethnic identity and often eager to connect with transnational/international avenues are developing in the border areas (see Part 2).

Contradictory signals

Interestingly, in parallel to this tightening legislative framework, the SAC has recently been communicating heartily regarding the teaching of ethnic minority languages in universities and in basic education schools, as well as the hiring and training of the Teaching Assistants (TA) and Language Teachers (LT) in charge of these subjects. In March 2021, the SAC chairman “instructed to appoint more TA/LT and provide decent salaries,” reiterating these instructions in September 2022. Ministry of Ethnic Affairs (MoEA) officials frequently include in their speeches the ubiquitous saying of warning against the “disappearance” of ethnic groups as a consequence of failing to protect their languages (စာပျောက်ရင် လူမျိုးပျောက်မယ် and variations around that formula). During the late months of 2022, short trainings for the improvements of these ethnic language teachers’ skills were organized in several States and Regions (including Karen, Kachin, Mon, Tanintharyi, Ayeyarwady, Magway and Yangon) with

ceremonies held in the local Education Colleges and widely reported in military-controlled media.

These were followed in late 2022 and early 2023 by public donations from the MoEA to some of the Literature and Culture Committees (LCCs, some of which may have been compelled to reluctantly participate), including in [Mon State](#) (see also [here](#)) and [Bago Region](#), as well as other education ceremonies involving [some of the LLCs](#) and the regional authorities. Incidentally, [perplexing articles](#) (original [here](#)) have seemingly advocated for MTB-MLE and could be spotted in the state media for 2023 International Mother Language Day, underlining the contradictions between the SAC's desire to project an image of inclusivity and actual legislative reforms under its rule.

In 2017 and the following years until the Covid pandemic and the coup, the civilian government began a process of hiring more than 11,000 ethnic languages TAs and creating the opportunity for the matriculation exam holders among them to pursue their training in Education Colleges and to ultimately become full-fledged teachers. In each State and Region, the LCCs attached to each ethnic group were playing a central role in this process by designing the curricula, selecting the teachers, and training them. Although from many stakeholders' standpoint the overall [language-in-education policy was not going far enough](#), these developments were nonetheless [generally perceived](#) (see also [here](#)) as a [noteworthy step forward](#), linking ethnic languages to job opportunities and increasing the proportion of teachers able to use and teach ethnic minority languages in government schools, with potentially genuine long-term educational and political benefits for the country. Critically, although the process was still young, some of the EAO's education departments were involved in the development of [their respective State local curricula](#).

In the post-coup context, however, the SAC's interest for ethnic languages teachers and willingness to appoint TAs belies other motives. In 2021, after an [increase of their salaries](#), some of the TAs who did not choose to join CDM were promoted in order to "[fill the gaps](#)" and [replace the missing workforce among primary school teachers](#). Late 2022 [speeches in the Education Colleges](#) suggest that the TAs could be perceived as a reserve of a (rather

docile) workforce, constituted of individuals in often precarious positions who would be grateful for a substantial promotion. Wearing colorful ethnic costumes during the [ceremonies as reported in the state media](#), these TAs not only contribute to illustrating the idea of an ethnically inclusive education system but may also be seen as a credible vehicle to convey the military's national [narrative into schooling](#).

The [reports of the trainings](#) given to the TAs in Education Colleges seem to emphasize their role as a kind of civics ([စာရိတ္တနှင့်ပြည်သူ့နိတိ](#)) teacher in charge of upholding “Union spirit” ([ပြည်ထောင်စုစိတ်ဓာတ်](#)), “patriotism” ([မျိုးချစ်စိတ်ဓာတ်](#)), and the “unity of the national races” ([တိုင်းရင်းသားစည်းလုံး ညီညွတ်ရေး](#)), all of which have been core concepts of the central state, and particularly of the various military governments, for many decades. Some of these speeches even exhort the TAs to contribute to “[အမျိုးစောင့်](#)” (protecting/defending the race/religion), a concept commonly used by Buddhist and nationalist hardliners (probably understood as inclusive of all the “national races” in this case).

Despite this communication and reiterated objectives in the state media, in practice the teaching of ethnic minority languages seems at best very unsystematic in the schools controlled by the military regime that have reopened. While the teaching of some ethnic languages in the schools under the SAC MoE has recently been the topic of [bilateral negotiations](#) in order to be [more systematic](#) (and possibly going [beyond the primary level in some regions](#)), elsewhere the interruption of education due to the pandemic and CDM in reaction to the coup, as well as [delayed salaries for the TAs](#), have often led to the [disappearance of local languages classes](#).

Overall, the opportunistic prioritization of short-sighted political benefits, including the desire to hold elections for which the SAC needs the participation of a credible number of ethnic parties, seems to be at odds with the military's monolithic conception of the Myanmar nation. This contradiction is also found in the SAC's language-in-education policy, which is rather confusing: a desire to seize upon previous governments' reforms

to project an image of inclusivity in its political communication; a drive towards using ethnic language teachers to instill the military's values and conception of the nation in the students' heads; the granting of privileges to groups willing to negotiate with the military in the frame of what resembles a classic divide-and-rule strategy; but also decisive legislative steps backward and very unsystematic teaching of ethnic minority languages in the schools controlled by the junta MoE. Meanwhile, in large chunks of the country's territory, non-state education systems, largely relying on local languages, have been expanding or have appeared since the coup (see [Part 2](#)).

Amendment of the National Education Law and other language-in-education developments following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar (Part 2)

In addition to spurring the partial collapse of the state education system and yielding a confusing language-in-education policy from the SAC (see [Part 1](#)), the 2021 military coup has profoundly affected the education landscape outside military-controlled schools and territories, notably in its linguistic dimension. The NUG has indeed committed to a Federal Democracy Education Policy and non-state education systems and schools have been expanding or (re)appearing. In the following sections, we try to outline the NUG's language-in-education policy, before moving on to three brief case studies.



An evolving language-in-education landscape, amidst conflict

Seemingly inspired to some extent by the National Network for Education Reform [pre-coup proposals](#) and in line with the [Federal Democracy Charter](#), the NUG has reiterated its [pledge to mother-tongue based multilingual education](#) (MTB-MLE) formulated in its [\(draft\) Federal Democracy Education Policy](#) released in September 2021 (and which should be transformed into a more [final document in the near future](#)). This policy entails a trilingual system (mother tongue, national language, international language) in primary and middle schools. This model, in comparison to what was being deployed under previous governments, is thus much more ambitious, with extensively documented, [multiple and genuine potential benefits, but also a number of tradeoffs and/or challenges](#) to deal with, particularly in the most linguistically heterogeneous regions. With federalism as a core inspiration, the (draft) Federal Democracy Education Policy entails a great deal of decentralization, with school education councils being in charge to decide, among other things, the language(s) of instruction, and with the possibility for each township and each ethnic region within a Region or State to develop

local curricula in accordance with their respective State/Region framework and with the approval of the State/Region Education Council.

Following the coup, pro-revolution higher education institutions such as [Spring University Myanmar](#) have been offering online classes for learning [several ethnic languages](#) (including Mon, Tai Long, Sgaw and West Pwo Karen, Jinghpaw, Rakhine and Tedim Chin). At the basic education level, multiple education programs, some of them directly [accredited](#) or [supported](#) by the NUG, have come to provide “interim education” ([ကြားကာလပညာရေး](#)) in “people’s schools” ([ပြည်သူ့ပညာရေးကျောင်း](#)), among other administrative functions, [in regions where the military-controlled state administration has collapsed](#), which include large parts of [Sagaing and Magway Regions](#). In ethnic minority regions, these education programs rely to different extents on local languages, with both educational and ethnic identity mobilization objectives – in alignment with the perspectives articulated in the Federal Democracy Charter and the Federal Democracy Education Policy – amidst a dramatically disrupted political context and a daily reality marked by conflict, displacement, threats of violence, and often an extremely acute lack of resources.

The sections that follow aim at providing a brief outline of some of the many significant language-in-education post-coup developments. The three case-studies – Kayah/Karenni, Chin and Kachin States – have been selected because of their relevance to our perspectives and the availability, access, and interest of researchers in our team. Other key geographies/organizations are not included here, and a comprehensive understanding of the multiple, complex, and rapidly evolving dynamics taking place in often dramatically difficult contexts is beyond the scope and ambitions of this post.

Kayah/Karenni State

Kayah (Karenni) State has been [hit extremely hard](#) by post-coup armed conflict, with up to [two-thirds of its population displaced by the crackdown on resistance groups](#) as the military is striving to secure the main roads. According to the Karenni Civil Society Network's [April 2023 figures](#), since the coup more than 200,000 people in Kayah State have become IDPs, over 1,100 have been killed, arrested or injured, and more than 2,600 CDM education staff have been dismissed. In multiple instances, schools have been directly targeted by military attacks, including [airstrikes](#).

The number of students enrolled in Kayah's State government schools has [plummeted in comparison with pre-coup figures](#), with SAC MoE statistics showing a drop of 87.5% in students sitting the matriculation exam in 2022-23 when compared with 2018-19. The vast majority of formal education in this state now appears to [happen outside of schools](#) controlled by the military regime. Rather, provision occurs through schooling led by [CDMers](#) and by [Ethnic Basic Education Providers \(EBEPs\)](#), in alignment with the perspective of a federal education as articulated by the NUG but often [operating independently](#) of the NUG.

[Kayah/Karenni State is one of the many ethnolinguistically diverse regions of Myanmar:](#) a total of nine languages (Kayah, Kayan, Kayaw, Gaybar, Yintelay, Manumanaw, as well as Tai Long, Sgaw Karen and Pa-o) were being [introduced as subjects in its government schools in 2019-20](#) as part of the local curriculum. As elsewhere, this diversity remains one of the key challenges in the post-coup context, and the [realization of an inclusive Karenni identity has been set as a priority by the Karenni State Consultative Council, a revolutionary body formed in April 2021](#) that works in partnership with the NUG and National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC).

Amidst the partial collapse of State administration and a new impetus for a federal education system since the coup, several networks of schools using different combinations of languages have been operating [in the midst of conflict and forced](#)

displacement, although many face an acute lack of basic school supplies. In townships such as Demoso, community schools run by CDMers are seeking support from local and national resistance organizations, and the Karenni Education Department (KnED) has expanded its network of schools while also developing a MTB-MLE approach in the Karenni/Kayah language. Within interim community-based schools, lessons inconsistent with Federal Democracy – History first and foremost – are being omitted, and a Karenni National History book was finalized in September 2022. Similarly, Kayan New Generation Youth (KNGY) has started to implement in 2022-23 a MTB-MLE program through a curriculum produced by the Central Kayan Literature and Culture Committee (using Pekon region's main dialect, often considered of high status and adopted as the Kayan standard since the early 2000s).

In addition to an education center with a strong focus on Karenni and English languages in eastern Demoso, a number of post-secondary options, such as Youth Academy College and New Horizon, have been working in partnership with Spring University Myanmar toward ongoing projects of creating Diploma programs. These higher education courses include local languages, cultures, and histories, although finding teachers for some of the local languages has constituted a challenge in the current context. New post-secondary education programs have also included a transnational focus, such as preparation courses towards Thai and international universities.

Chin State

Following staunch local resistance and the constitution of the Chin Defense Forces as early as March-April 2021, Chin State has also been extremely disrupted by the coup. Particularly hard-hit regions include Thantlang (see also here), Mindat, and bordering areas of Sagaing and Magway Regions. According to the Chin Human Rights Organization, two years after the coup a quarter of the state's population has been displaced (including both refugees and IDPs). In addition to hundreds of deaths, close to 1,500 people have

been arrested and over 2,000 houses and religious buildings have been destroyed; tens of thousands have fled to the neighboring Indian state of [Mizoram](#), with [reportedly thousands of children](#) in government and private schools, as well as many [out-of school children](#).

Characterized by a sharp mountainous topography, Chin State (and its neighboring regions) is home to a great ethnolinguistic diversity, even by Myanmar's standards: prior to the 2021 military coup, 24 languages and counting were in the process of being [introduced as subjects in its government schools](#), while multiple and often challenging projects to select (or even create) one or several main/common languages were underway. This diversity remains one of the challenges to the mobilization of a common identity, yet the coup has also contributed to [strengthening a sense of belonging to an overarching Chin nation](#).

The Chin State administration and schooling system has collapsed to a significant extent [outside of some major towns and roads](#). Township-level People's Administration Bodies (PABs), [in general alignment with the NUG's federalist perspectives \(but not under its direct authority\)](#), have taken over with associated [education departments](#) (some community schools also seem to operate independently). These local education systems run in [extremely difficult conditions](#), with [volunteer or quasi-volunteer \(sometimes CDM\) teachers](#) in the context of [an acute lack of resources](#), and deal with [major security threats](#). In some cases, they operate both sides of the border with India: for instance, the [Matupi township education committee](#) runs 150 schools, some of which are located inside Mizoram, which lead towards the NUG's Basic Education Completion Assessment (BECA).

In terms of curriculum, these schools usually follow to some extent the national framework but with various degrees of adaptation to the [local contexts](#). [Local Chin languages](#) tend to be included, both as subjects and "classroom languages" (oral media of instruction – a situation which is not new in Chin State). In some cases, [most of the schooling seems to be conducted through local Chin languages](#), which is [described as a very positive development](#) by the newly established education administration, and

with [Burmese as a subject in primary schools](#). As the national history curriculum in its current version is perceived as [irrelevant for Chin State and incompatible with federal education](#), ongoing projects also include the [development of a Chin history curriculum](#), with 80% on the history of the Chin Nation (ချင်းပြည်ထောင်စုမိုင်းကြောင်း) and 20% of local content (မိမိဒေသ သမိုင်းကြောင်း).

Kachin State

Experiencing conflict since 2011, Kachin State has also been profoundly disrupted by the coup and its consequences. The Kachin Independence Organization (KIO), one of the Myanmar military's most long standing and redoubtable opponents, has been largely aligned with the NUG's federal perspectives. In the wake of the coup in [2021](#) and [2022](#), the KIO's education system has experienced a major increase in the number of enrolled students from diverse ethno-linguistic backgrounds, which is not unlike the experiences of the Karen National Union's (KNU) [Karen Education and Culture Department](#) (KECD). However, its model in terms of language-in-education (with, so far, Kachin language and culture as an [additional subject](#) alongside the national curriculum and as a “classroom language”) seems to have required less adaptation than [KNU's Karen-medium education system](#), which recently [opened additional Karen language classes to help this new population of students](#) overcome language challenges.

Similar to the [KNU](#), the KIO shelters [CDMers from the education sector](#), who have become involved in a variety of online and in-person education projects. The graduates of KIO's high schools can enroll in a number of [higher education institutions, notably those located in its territory](#). This includes the newly opened [Kachin State Comprehensive University](#), which was jointly established by the KIO, the NUG, and CDM teachers, and has recently held the [first graduation ceremonies](#) of [programs in literary and scientific subjects](#).

In Kachin State, the SAC, in line with previous military governments, has carried on with its [divide and rule](#) strategy (a practice itself largely rooted in [Myanmar's colonial past](#)); other regional armed groups have [different political stances and strategies vis-à-vis the junta](#). Some schools controlled by the military regime have been reopening in Kachin State, particularly in the more remote regions where alternatives are lacking and [access to the internet is scarce](#) (in addition to [other challenges of alternative online schooling](#)). Despite [financial incentive](#), however, the extent of this reopening is limited and the schools' [educational standards often seem questionable](#).

The Kachin Baptist Convention's church-based education programs have been revived, retaking to some extent the role churches had between the early decades of the 20th century and the mid-1960s with full-time teaching. These schools tend to at least partially follow the (Burmese language) national curriculum, but some prefer a curriculum in English. Different combinations of Jinghpaw and other local languages are also used in these schools, which seem to gather children from very diverse populations.

Other recent language-in-education developments in Kachin State include an increasing popularity of Chinese schools, which tend to be affordable and open academic, as well as at times professional, avenues towards Taiwan, Hong Kong and [mainland China](#). Several Kachin National Schools (*Myusha Jawng / Myu Shalat Jawng*), which started before the coup, also run in urban centers and constitute an alternative to government education, using Jinghpaw and English as the main media of instruction.

Amidst dramatic situations of conflict and with new impetus for an education in line with federalist perspectives, the coup has profoundly altered Myanmar's education landscape, which more than ever resembles a battlefield. Regarding language-in-education policy, the SAC, in contrast with its communication in state-media, has made major legislative steps back in the schools under its control, which have experienced a severe drop in enrolment and attractivity (see [Part 1](#)). Meanwhile, non-state education systems and

schools in Kayah/Karenni, Chin and Kachin States (and assuredly in other States/Regions) are largely integrating local languages and have been expanding or appearing, often in extremely precarious contexts, in general alignment with federalist perspective, and with various degrees of collaboration with the NUG. At a time of great disruption and great political uncertainties for Myanmar and its populations, one of the few predictions that seems safe to make is that education, ethnic identities and, at their intersection, language-in-education matters will remain among the core aspects of Myanmar's longstanding and unresolved issues, and thereby one of the key components of any durable political solutions.

*This two-part article is dedicated to **Mael Raynaud** (1976-2022). It is part of a research project involving several organizations, operating inside and outside of Myanmar, including the Institut de Recherche sur l'Asie du Sud-Est Contemporaine (IRASEC), Mahidol University's Institute of Human Rights and Peace Studies (IHRP), and CASE.*

The six authors all work/study in the field of education, in very diverse positions and locations, inside and outside of Myanmar. We wish to warmly thank all the reviewers for their close readings and constructive comments.