

## **Displaced Myanmar Students in Thailand: Breaking Barriers to Education and Stability**

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**Policy Brief Series (2025/04)**

### **Key Finding**

The 2021 coup in Myanmar heightened migration, forcing many to flee to Thailand and causing internal displacement due to fear of arrest by security forces.

Undocumented migrants in Thailand, including students, face severe restrictions and exploitation that hinder their access to education, yet many remain determined to continue their studies despite these challenges.

Many are seeking alternative education options to address formal education's shortcomings, but marginalized communities often find them inaccessible, facing ongoing mental and financial challenges.

Inclusive, decentralized education systems are urgently needed to support displaced Myanmar students with practical skills and academic pathways. Local education providers should lead program delivery, supported by host country ministries through flexible enrollment policies. International aid and education agencies should provide targeted funding and technical support to strengthen local efforts and expand access to underserved students.

## Executive Summary

Following the 2021 military coup in Myanmar, people across the country protested against the junta regime by the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which included students refusing to attend schools and universities controlled by the military and educators from high schools and universities. Starting in February 2021, the Myanmar military junta violently cracked down on peaceful protesters and civilians who were against them, issuing warrants, conducting house searches, making arrests, and killing individuals which also increased the risk of forced displacements in both internal and external migration sectors. Thailand remains a popular destination for people from Myanmar both for formal and irregular migration, driven by political and economic factors, including the recent enforcement of the conscription law by the junta government. Our research study examined the challenges faced by displaced university students from Myanmar in Thailand, particularly in Mae Sot, a border town connected to Myanmar, by uncovering their migration patterns and experiences as new migrants in Thailand. These students mainly faced legal challenges, financial difficulties, and educational

barriers after being forcibly displaced due to their activism against the 2021 coup. This policy brief highlights the impact of the authoritarian regime on pro-democracy activism, as well as the need for policy interventions to ensure access to education, legal protection, and stability in foreign settings.

## Background

Myanmar has a rich history of student movements, dating from British colonial rule to the period before the 2021 coup. Myanmar's education reform movement started in 1920 under colonial rule with student protests against the Education Act, leading to independent schools; however in 1962, students protested the military government's unfair policies, resulting in a violent crackdown and in 2014, the Myanmar National Education Law was proposed, but concerns about its limitations sparked more protests in 2015, which were suppressed (Bo Thein, 2023). Most of these efforts were suppressed by successive governments, resulting in killings and detentions. After the 2021 coup, many students and participants in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) faced persecution, leading to mass arrests and forced migration. As the junta military targeted young people and students,

traditional migration processes could not be used. Military checkpoints and airport immigration checks weaponized personal identification, exposing individuals to the risk of arrest and detention (Mizzima News Media, 2024). Thailand, particularly Mae Sot, has become a key migration hub for people from Myanmar (BBC, 2024). Many individuals lack proper documentation or are unable to use their travel documents due to threats from the military junta. As a result, they often resort to irregular border crossings and face limitations as undocumented migrants in Thailand.

Following the 2021 coup, Myanmar's education system entered a state of crisis characterized by widespread disruptions, the arrests of teachers, and a significant decline in student enrollment, as many students joined the CDM. (University World News. 2023). As a result, an entire generation is facing substantial learning setbacks. Public distrust in the military-controlled education system—often referred to as “military slave education”—remains exceptionally high. Furthermore, the military has targeted schools in rural and war zone areas with airstrikes and bombings, tragically resulting in the deaths of

several children (The Guardian, 2024). Displaced students faced significant challenges in their pursuit of education. Due to threats from the military, they decided not to return to schools and universities controlled by the junta regime and instead sought alternative learning opportunities. Many of these students turned to online education despite high internet data costs and the military-imposed internet shutdowns in conflict areas (FULCRUM, 2025). However, the lack of a formal educational structure and financial pressures forced them to prioritize immediate survival over education. Teachers and students face serious dangers, and there are not enough academic resources and learning materials to help them. On top of that, almost five years of problems caused by COVID-19 might make students lose interest in continuing their education.

### **Legal and Undocumented Challenges**

Many students and educators have fled their homes due to safety concerns related to their activism. Some have been displaced from urban areas, while others have moved from rural areas. Many people have been forcibly displaced to Thailand's border areas due to ongoing conflicts in ethnic armed

regions, where they are less vulnerable to arrest by the Myanmar junta forces. The junta regime has been targeting dissidents by using personal and travel document identification at their checkpoints, including border gates and airports. As a result, people are unable to use their legal documents for migration and are facing challenges as undocumented migrants in Thailand. A university student activist shared his experience of migration, saying,

*“During my time in Yangon, my personal information was exposed by the junta. I had to hide from military forces and couldn’t stay in my own home. I relied on the hospitality of friends and relatives, but this also put their safety at risk due to my situation. The pressure became overwhelming, forcing me to move from the urban city of Yangon to the jungle.”*

Eventually, he was displaced to the Thailand border and found himself in an undocumented situation. Many dissident participants, including CDM educators and students, migrated to Mae Sot, Thailand, through undocumented means to escape the dangers of the military coup. Some crossed the border irregularly from liberated areas controlled by Karen Ethnic Armed Groups. Lacking valid residence or work permits, they faced

constant risks of arrest by Thai authorities, with potential fines or deportation to Myanmar. In our survey of approximately 30 new young migrants, we found that the penalties they informally paid to Thai police for lacking legal stay permits varied significantly: 4% paid a fine of less than 1,000 THB (30 USD), 33% were fined between 1,001 and 5,000 THB (30-148 USD), 26% paid fines ranging from 5,001 to 10,000 THB (148-295 USD), 4% were fined between 10,001 and 20,000 THB (295-590), and 8% incurred fines exceeding 30,000 THB (885 USD). This breakdown highlights the varying financial burdens young migrants face due to their undocumented status.

Despite the Thai government issuing Non-Thai Identification Cards (also referred as pink cards) for migrant workers, obtaining legal documentation remains challenging due to the fear of detention and high costs. The process is often delayed, and many migrants struggle to afford the associated fees. Some have been exploited by brokers who promise assistance but end up scamming them. One interviewee shared how financial difficulties were the main barrier to obtaining documentation, as the official process

had not been opened. She described her experience with a broker, highlighting the risks of being scammed and the delays and expenses she faced in obtaining her pink card. Legalizing their status in Thailand is not simple, as Thailand asks for national identification for migrant workers along with endorsement documents from the Myanmar junta government, such as a passport or certificate of citizenship. This poses high-security risks for people who are displaced from Myanmar due to their political activism. From our research participants, we learned that their initial difficulties upon arriving in Thailand encompassed various issues, such as dealing with legal matters, financial instability, unemployment, social isolation, finding appropriate housing, language obstacles, and addressing mental health challenges like depression and anxiety stemming from their undocumented status. Lacking legal documents prevents them from finding stable jobs and adds to their daily struggles.

For new migrants involved in political activities who have crossed the border irregularly into Thailand, their top priority is to legalize their stay in the country to ensure their safety. To

address this situation, Thailand, which has over half of its migrant worker population made up of Myanmar migrants, needs to establish a long-term policy for both political and economic migrants from Myanmar. This policy should aim to enhance their well-being and ensure access to basic human rights while living in a foreign country. Thailand should allow Myanmar people to stay and work legally without requiring endorsement documents from the Myanmar junta. This is important for those who refuse to obtain such documents due to safety concerns or for those who lack them because the junta has not issued them, often due to their involvement in political activities.

### **Barriers to Accessing Education**

All displaced students interviewed expressed their determination to continue their education despite the challenges posed by the Myanmar crisis. Fearing the threats of the military junta, they chose not to return to their schools but found alternative ways to study. Although they couldn't access formal education, students relied on online learning and educators who were also displaced. They took courses that were essential for their current needs, such as GED classes for university entry or

vocational training for survival. One student shared,

*“There was a lot of destruction in my education journey due to the coup. Now, I'm not going in the direction I want, but I'm continuing my education based on the opportunities I get.”*

Irregular migration and undocumented status have significantly hindered students' ability to pursue formal education and complete their academic degrees. In order to enroll in Thai educational institutions, students are required to have legal documentation and academic records or endorsements from their previous educational levels. However, due to displacement and ongoing threats, many students were unable to bring the necessary documents with them. As a result, students must first regularize their undocumented status and obtain their previous certificates and academic transcripts before they can enroll in Thai universities.

As CDM students who refused to study under the junta government, many are unable to obtain the necessary documents to prove their academic history. A key issue is whether Thai academic institutions can admit students without proper academic

endorsements from the Myanmar junta government. The bureaucratic challenges further complicate their ability to pursue education. Despite their desire to continue studying, students need official documentation, such as certificates and transcripts, to verify their education level. However, obtaining these documents is often difficult or impossible. The lack of official certificates to confirm their academic history or residency status creates significant barriers, hindering their progress and blocking their educational opportunities.

## Recommendation

The distinction between refugees and economic migrants is increasingly blurred in the case of Myanmar migration to Thailand, as political instability pushes people out while labor demands simultaneously pull them in. Thailand currently lacks a comprehensive long-term migration policy to enhance legal residency, work permits, and access to public services, which would improve the prevention of human trafficking, scams, bribery, and human rights violations.

Many young people in Myanmar have faced significant disruptions to their education since the

COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and have been displaced both internally and externally since the coup in 2021. Their ability to continue their education is dependent on the challenges they encounter in their current situations. New migrant students in Thailand, who lack official academic records and legal residency permits, are often excluded from educational opportunities and find themselves trapped in exploitative labor conditions. Engaging students in a decentralized alternative education system that is inclusive and accessible requires integrating their real-world struggles into the educational framework. This approach should provide both practical skills and academic knowledge, ensuring that the learning experience reflects their lived realities. While only a small portion of students currently have access to continuing education through local initiatives and collaborations with regional and international communities. To have a more significant impact and broaden coverage, it is essential to better integrate and enhance local efforts. International education aid should focus on Myanmar's educational development during the current crisis in more practical ways. Instead of viewing education as a privilege, we should see it as an urgent necessity to address the

educational gaps faced by many youths in Myanmar. Regional universities, including Thailand and other global higher education institutions, should not deny access to education based on the absence of documentation from a brutal junta-controlled government. Admission processes should prioritize the knowledge and qualifications of students over bureaucratic barriers. Education is crucial for Myanmar students, as it not only enhances their individual well-being but also serves as a form of resistance and political philosophy revolution against the junta regime and societal inequalities, contributing to a better community.

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Cited as:

Wai Yan Lin, Haymarn Soe Nyunt, Yin Lae Aung & Nan Satt Naung. (2025). *Displaced Myanmar Students in Thailand: Breaking Barriers to Education and Stability* ( Policy Brief Series No. 4/2025). YCU-RI.