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SPRING SPROUTS · RESEARCH BRIEFING

Anyar Parliaments Beyond Uncertainties

Subnational Parliaments in Central

Myanmar

English edition

Spring Sprouts

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This briefing examines the role of the Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway unit parliaments during the revolution, through a comparative study of subnational parliaments in other countries and through interviews.

Translation Note: This is AI-assisted Translation reviewed by a human editor.

Summary

- More than four years after the 2021 coup, interim arrangements and the features of a government have emerged in the Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway federal units, making it necessary for the subnational parliaments to recalibrate their role.
- The experience of the American provincial congresses (1774-1776) and the Kurdistan Parliament (1994-1998) shows that subnational parliaments moved quickly to build new institutions to fill gaps in governance.
- The three federal unit parliaments developed in three phases, and were most active in the second phase, when the interim arrangements were enacted, and in the third, after unit governments emerged.
- Financial scrutiny is their weakest function, and a similar weaknesses such as the NUG's failure have been passed down to the units.
- Convening sessions, difficulties in law-making and the influence of the mother party are the main challenges facing the unit parliaments.
- The briefing makes recommendations on the parliaments' image and capacity, law-making for the revolution, oversight and scrutiny, and partner and external relations.

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1. Introduction

Following the military coup of 2021, most state and region units formed their own parliamentary representative committees and got involved in Myanmar's Spring Revolution. More than four years on, the features of a government have gradually emerged, together with interim arrangements, in the Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway federal units. This development marks a conceptual turning point on Myanmar's arduous journey towards federal democracy. At the same time, it has raised concerns about whether the unit parliaments can timely enact the laws that the work of government requires. In other words, the question is whether the unit parliaments can re-examine and recalibrate their role within this newly emerging political landscape.

This briefing examines the role of the unit parliaments through a comparative study of revolutionary-era subnational parliaments in other countries and through interviews with unit parliament representatives, unit government members and civilian political actors in Myanmar. Four people were interviewed, and framework analysis was applied to the information they provided and to information collected from the Facebook pages of the three unit parliaments. The briefing reviews the revolutionary-era work of the three unit parliaments,

and identifies and recommends the steps they should take next for the success of the Spring Revolution.

2. Parliaments under Normal Political Conditions

The role of a parliament goes far beyond legislation alone. A parliament performs four core functions: representing the people of its constituencies, drafting and enacting laws, overseeing the executive, and controlling public finances. Whatever a country's size, geography or political system, a parliament must perform these functions to be effective and accountable. They are also reflected in the 25 indicators developed under the leadership of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which make it possible to assess the strengths and weaknesses of parliaments.

Representing the people is the primary duty of a parliament and its members. Members are in regular contact with the people of their constituencies, and parliament is a forum in which the diverse views of society as a whole are expressed. Parliament drafts bills, consults stakeholders, enacts laws and scrutinises them after enactment. It also monitors government action to identify unintended consequences and to ensure consistency with government policy or international commitments, and it exercises financial oversight by enacting

appropriation laws, tax laws and other relevant legislation (Inter-Parliamentary Union [IPU], 2023).

Conceptually, federalism can be analysed along three dimensions: executive power divided between the federal and unit governments, legislative power divided between the federal and unit legislatures, and judicial power divided between federal and unit courts. In other words, constituent units must have their own executive, legislative and judicial branches, guaranteed by a constitution (Cameron & Falleti, 2005, p. 248). On this basis, it can be said that a unit parliament must perform the four functions as much as a federal parliament.

3. Revolution and Subnational Parliaments

When a political system fails to change in step with the development of society, political crisis follows. In particular, when a ruling government suppresses the people's fundamental rights and entitlements, resistance inevitably emerges. When the conditions for such resistance arise, the question of what role parliament should play tends to surface. This section compares the American provincial congresses (1774-1776) and the Kurdistan Parliament in Iraq (1994-1998).

3.1 Revolutionary Governance and Institution-Building

During the American Revolution, the collapse of British colonial administration and the departure of the royal governors gave rise to provincial congresses, which for the interim period temporarily combined legislative, executive and judicial functions. They also set up administrative mechanisms such as committees of safety to carry out administration and security in revolutionary territory (Novak, 2026; Squire, 2019). Similarly, after the Iraqi government's administrative machinery withdrew from the Kurdistan region following the 1991 Gulf War, the Iraqi Kurdistan Front governed through committees controlled by party-affiliated military leaders. Elections were then held, and the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Kurdistan Parliament were established. The newly elected parliament unilaterally declared Kurdistan a federal region, setting it on the path to existing as a *de facto* independent state (Arif & Mokhtar, 2022; Taha & Movileanu, 2021). These experiences show that when a vacuum of executive authority opens up during a revolution, subnational parliaments quickly build new administrative institutions to fill it and lay down the legal foundations the revolution's goals require.

3.2 Representation and Institutional Legitimacy

Maintaining institutional legitimacy during armed conflict is a major challenge for revolutionary parliaments, and the American provincial congresses and the Kurdistan Parliament took markedly different approaches to it. During the American Revolution, facing the British army and counter-revolution by loyalists, the provincial congresses built legitimacy through coerced political allegiance. South Carolina, for example, drew up a General Association pledging its signatories' lives and fortunes to the revolution, made signing it compulsory, and branded those who refused as "enemies to the liberties of the colonies". Such political pressure and suppression of dissent were meant to preserve a united political front for the revolution (Novak, 2026). The Kurdistan Parliament, by contrast, sustained its legitimacy not by enforcing political loyalty but by keeping the institution viable amid political division. In the 1992 elections the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan won almost equal shares of the vote, producing a system of equal power-sharing. The result was a power struggle that ignited civil war and split the region into two rival administrations. Remarkably, members of parliament did not take an active part in the fighting; instead, they staged a peaceful 103-day sit-in inside the parliament chamber in protest against the armed conflict. At

the same time, by jointly enacting laws that applied to both rival administrations, the parliament preserved legal unity and the de facto sovereignty of the Kurdistan region (Arif & Mokhtar, 2022; Taha & Movileanu, 2021).

3.3 Legislation and Oversight

The American provincial congresses widened their interventions in response to wartime economic pressure and exercised broad regulatory power over local economies. Connecticut, for example, introduced licensing for many goods to curb speculation and reset prices to their 1774 levels. The congresses' measures were not confined to social and economic affairs; they extended to military preparation, taxation, and the monitoring and punishment of those siding with the enemy (Novak, 2026). The Kurdistan Parliament in Iraq, on the other hand, was markedly weak in performing its basic functions under exceptional circumstances. Formal mechanisms for overseeing the cabinet existed, such as questions, hearings and motions of no confidence, but strict party discipline and party control exercised from outside parliament severely limited their effectiveness (Arif & Mokhtar, 2022; Taha & Movileanu, 2021). This shows that subnational parliaments have had to adjust, in line with the realities on the ground, to fulfil functions transformed by abnormal conditions such as revolution and civil war.

4. Three Unit Parliaments in Myanmar's Spring Revolution

An examination of the role of the Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway unit parliaments in Myanmar's Spring Revolution shows that they developed in three phases. The first phase ran from 2021 to late 2023. During this period their activity was limited to forming parliamentary representative committees and sectoral committees, and to re-sharing statements by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) and the National Unity Government (NUG); 2022 in particular can be regarded as the year in which the unit parliaments were least active. The second phase began with the preparation and enactment of interim arrangements and lasted until late 2025, when unit governments were formed. After that came the third phase, the period in which the functions of a parliament are needed most. In other words, the unit parliaments were most active in the second and third phases, which is also when they emerged as parliaments in the full sense.

In the early period of the revolution, the unit parliaments could only issue operational guidelines for the People's Administration Teams, and even these merely restated CRPH statements. Later they enacted the laws needed for the interim arrangements and approved the arrangements themselves. As the unit

governments created under the interim arrangements needed more laws, the unit parliaments' legislative agendas also widened, to include a government law, a defence and security council law, a law on defence, security and police forces, a local governance law, a municipal law and a judiciary law. The unit parliaments have also supported local politics through law-making. The law on preparations for drafting the Magway Federal Unit's interim arrangement, which the Magway unit parliament amended several times, is notable for a composition that gives weight to local ethnic nationalities and for a drafting commission whose term suits the revolutionary period.

As for representing the people, the unit parliaments have, as might be expected in a revolution, been limited in fully performing this function. Even so, representatives say they have served as patrons when township-level People's Administration Teams were formed, and have helped and cared for CDM staff and political prisoners. Two patterns can be seen in the oversight of government, before and after unit governments emerged. Before they emerged, it was the NUG that carried out administration, military affairs and justice within the federal units, which made oversight difficult for the unit parliaments. Despite these difficulties, interviewees say that sectoral committees of the two parliaments liaised on security matters, and that problems in local administration were discussed

at meetings between the NUG and the unit parliaments. Now that unit governments exist, the unit parliaments have a legal basis for holding them to account, and whether mutual checks will develop remains to be seen.

Financial scrutiny, a regular function of any parliament, can be said to have been the weakest over more than five years of the Spring Revolution. Even before the three federal units emerged, the CRPH exercised little financial oversight of the NUG. This weakness has been visible in all three federal units, and their parliaments and governments are trying to correct it. The Sagaing and Magway unit parliaments, for example, are working to pass tax bills, and the Mandalay Region parliament is drafting financial regulations. According to interviews, the Magway unit parliament had to draft an emergency budget law for the coming fiscal year at the request of the unit government.

The revolutionary duties of the unit parliaments must include, at a minimum, relations with partners, relations with allies, and participation in federal governance. In partner relations, the unit parliaments remain in regular contact with local forces; a good example is the Mandalay Region convergence platform (Man Taing Sone Sii Yar), which meets monthly and shares updates on parliamentary work.

Relations with allies, however, are conducted only at the level of individual representatives. Representatives serve as patrons of the People's Administration Teams and also send recruits to, and provide training for, the People's Defence Force, so relations with ethnic revolutionary organisations are conducted through the NUG's Ministry of Defence. In the Steering Council for the Emergence of a Federal Democratic Union (SCEF), however, a recent new development, the unit parliaments take part in the secretariat and working committees by sending representatives together with the unit governments. In federal governance, the unit parliaments have had very little part in power-sharing discussions with the NUG, which may later affect their law-making for the competences they receive.

5. Factors Affecting the Unit Parliaments

Once thinking shifted to the idea that building a federal state requires at least two governments, a major opportunity opened up for Myanmar's Spring Revolution. The unit parliaments became more active, and as the necessary laws were enacted, unit governments emerged one after another. This created a legal basis for one of parliament's functions, the oversight of government.

The maturing of government institutions within the federal units is also an opportunity to enact laws suited to local conditions.

In this respect, the Mandalay Region parliament aims to enact effective laws on the People's Administration Teams and on natural resource management. People who served as members of parliament in 2015-2020 also sit in the unit parliament, which reportedly helped in forming sectoral committees. Unexpected developments, such as Starlink internet and the response to the Sagaing earthquake, also opened ways to convene parliament and deliver public services. On finance, the Sagaing Federal Unit reckons that if the tax revenue collected locally is carefully scrutinised and spent, it alone will be enough to sustain the revolution.

On the other hand, the first challenge the unit parliaments face is convening sessions. Because some representatives have joined the military regime or lost contact with parliament, the parliaments struggle to meet the quorum, and in the early period they also faced the regime's internet and phone shutdowns. The second challenge concerns legislation. In Mandalay Region in particular, the loss of controlled territory and the dispersal of representatives have made law-making difficult. And because a government law has not yet been passed and power-sharing is not yet settled, no budget law has been tabled either.

This makes it difficult to hold the unit government to account, and affects both funding for public services and the enactment of public service laws. According to interviews, the Sagaing unit parliament and the Mandalay Region parliament do not regard their representatives' capacity as a challenge. In the Magway unit parliament, however, representatives' limited legal experience and political thinking, their weak influence over the mother party, and the absence of former representatives were cited as factors undermining its performance.

Since Sagaing, Mandalay and Magway are areas where the National League for Democracy is dominant, the relationship between representatives and their mother party also deserves attention. In the Sagaing and Mandalay federal units there is reportedly no major conflict between parliament and party; the three parliaments and the party meet regularly and exchange updates. On party policy, the Sagaing unit parliament reportedly holds to Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's six federal principles, five principles for unit governments and six principles for unit parliaments, and to the 2020 election manifesto, while the Mandalay Region parliament says it adapts party guidance to conditions on the ground without departing from party policy.

In the Magway Federal Unit, by contrast, the absence of a political leadership body that includes all forces has allowed party influence to cause friction between the unit government and parliament.

The clearest instance came while the unit was seeking SCEF membership, when the representatives themselves reportedly split into factions. In other words, the mother party's influence has produced different ways of thinking in the unit government and the parliament, and whether they can work together in the long term needs to be watched closely.

6. Recommendations

For the unit parliaments to recalibrate their role in a changing political landscape, the following points should be given priority:

1. Parliamentary Image and Capacity

Rather than continuing as an administrative arm within the NUG's bureaucracy, representatives should gradually hand these tasks over to government staff and focus more on the affairs of their constituencies. Parliaments should also try to convene regularly and devise ways of achieving a quorum suited to the revolutionary period. The Sagaing unit parliament, for instance, removed representatives who had joined the military regime or lost contact with parliament from the list of those eligible to attend, so as to raise the share of representatives present.

As for capacity, the experience of former 2015-2020 representatives is invaluable, and representatives themselves should keep building their capacity to become legally competent and to understand the revolutionary climate.

2. Law-Making for the Revolution

Whether parliament can enact the laws the unit government needs is a genuine concern. Because of this, the Mandalay and Magway federal units are preparing to keep operating on the basis of policy until laws are enacted. Parliament therefore needs to enact quickly the laws required for administration on the ground to be carried out lawfully. It should also create legal certainty by declaring which pre-coup laws remain in force and which have been repealed. In legislating, parliament should give weight to laying legal foundations for the revolutionary government, supporting local political alliances, and making laws that suit local conditions.

3. Oversight and Scrutiny

In the coming years, the unit parliaments should put more effort into representing the people. They should learn from the way unexpected events, the Sagaing earthquake response in particular, gave parliaments an opportunity to represent their constituencies. This duty of representation is all the more important at times of intense fighting and while local administration is being established.

Now that unit governments exist, parliaments should also keep their sectoral committees working effectively so that they can oversee government. On financial scrutiny, parliaments should table motions urging their governments to appoint an Auditor-General and to prepare budget estimates.

4. Alliance and External Relations

The unit parliaments should maintain the relations among themselves that existed before the interim arrangements were drafted, which would benefit mutual learning and the sharing of experience among federal units. Good regional partner relations can also reduce inappropriate outside interference in the region, so processes of this kind should be supported so that they continue. In external relations, they should keep working to inform international diplomats and organisations about the military's war crimes and developments in the region, and strengthen their relations with international or regional parliamentary bodies. Although power-sharing with the NUG is not yet settled, they should prepare supporting work in advance, in anticipation of that time, to build parliament's legislative capacity and the unit civil service.

7. Conclusion

In the early period of the revolution, the unit parliaments simply followed the CRPH's lead, and in 2022 in particular they undertook no significant activity. From the end of 2023, however, the parliaments became more active and took on more legislative work. When unit governments emerged, the legal needs of local governance grew, and oversight of those governments also became necessary. At the same time, there is a need to speak up on behalf of the people about crimes committed against civilians by revolutionary forces. This shows that the core functions of a parliament do not diminish during a revolution; only their nature changes. As a revolutionary period also brings new duties, the role of the unit parliaments becomes all the more important. This briefing therefore concludes that, to carry out their functions effectively, the unit parliaments need to keep recalibrating their role, with the interests of their regions in view and in line with the revolutionary situation and political developments.

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About Spring Sprouts

Spring Sprouts is a research project of The Ananda Center of Participatory Democracy. It monitors and researches the new landscape and developments of the 2021 Spring Revolution: the political and military organisations taking part in it, their activities, and the alliances among them. Spring Sprouts also provides technical support to revolutionary forces, organises informal meetings and workshops among them, and arranges meetings between revolutionary organisations and international diplomats and organisations.

Spring Sprouts aims to present the ever-changing landscape of the Spring Revolution to the public and the international community through clear and accessible information, visualisations, articles and research. Spring Sprouts holds that public interest, active participation and critical feedback in political processes, and the flow of appropriate and accurate information among those working for democracy, are essential parts of democracy.



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