

A New World Beyond the Trench

Myanmar's Fight Against Dictatorship

There was speculation about a possible coup in Myanmar starting in mid-January 2021. Foreigner friends residing in Yangon were asking if it was likely. I said “no” because anyone with sensible judgement could have predicted that staging a coup would come at a huge cost to society in the middle of the Covid-19 crisis. A single misstep in politics would cause additional suffering to the public living with the emergency Covid-19 restrictions and resultant economic decline. I woke up early in the morning on 1 February 2021 to an internet blackout. Shortly after, many SMS messages arrived on our phones confirming a coup was staged in Nay Pyi Taw, the nation's capital. I was shocked to realize that the country again was plunged into dictatorship

after the experimental period of the “democratic transition” between 2011-2021. The military leaders again disregard the electoral victory of the National League for Democracy (NLD), the country's most popular party led by the daughter of Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's independence hero, just as they did in 1990. Alongside key members of NLD's government, many activists and artists were also detained.

The country was in a total shock for the first two days. Many of us were talking to each other in close circles, discussing how to react, yet we all knew that the army would crush us – possibly to death – as soon as we gathered for protest, if history be the guide. The first action came on the night of 2 February, happening across many places in Yangon

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and later spreading across the whole country. A Facebook page, သံပဲခိုးတီး-Than Bone Tee, was created by unknown campaigners where they raised the first call: "Let's bang pots and pans at

8 o'clock tonight". This early action was a relatively easy way to participate: banging on pots and pans requires only a long wooden spoon from the kitchen or a stick that can be found anywhere in the garden. While this social media call could not reach the whole country, or even the whole of Yangon, it ignited the flame of anger and grief throughout the country. Since then, every night, millions of households across Myanmar, in both urban and rural areas, thundered with the noise of banging in the hope that this traditional practice of chasing out evil spirits would also send a serious reminder to the Generals to change their course.

As social media users amplified and the media broadcast the banging, musicians responded by quickly creating songs that called for regular pots and pan protests. The Burmese version of "Do You Hear the People Sing?" from *Les Misérables* created by Zin Linn was one of the most popular songs for banging hours:

*Listen to the songs of the people, the music of agony
This song is for commitment to fight back
We can't bear the oppression of the regime
Our heartbeats find rhyming with the traditional drums,
We witness that a new day is arriving
We will make this moment a milestone in history!
Shall we hold our hands together for the fight?
Let's do it when we see a new world beyond the trench.
A new life with liberty is what we want.*

At night, we all sang these songs and shouted slogans together from our windows or at street protest points, where pictures of military leaders were scattered on the ground. In big cities including Yangon, where most people live in small apartments, people do not tend to know all their neighbours, but felt energized with the knowledge that many people were in solidarity fighting together to topple the military. In the daytime, we went out to the streets to protest and all major junctions in Yangon, Mandalay, and other cities were full of people for two months in February and March 2021.

Taking protest to the street

From 4 February 2021, protest groups came out wearing different associational flags, banners, and costumes. Despite the serious economic decline caused by the pandemic, the people were very eager to spend their money on donations for the protests – food, water, juice, and campaign materials were ample on the streets. Those protest days would end early, as the police would quickly attack the demonstrations, and the noise of sound grenades and even live shooting in the street spread panic.

The State Administrative Council led by the military began to notice that its initial calculation was wrong: the detention of many well-known activists did not quell demonstrations. Millions took to the street with their three fingers raised – a salute that is understood as an anti-dictatorship symbol in Thailand and Hong Kong, and which was also embraced by the Myanmar protesters. The symbol, originating in the "Hunger Games" film series, sometimes might carry other meanings such as "Thank you" and "Good-bye".

In Myanmar, it became a symbol of solidarity and represented three demands: 1. to end the military rule; 2. to abolish the current constitution, which guarantees 25 percent permanent seats in parliament and three key law enforcement ministries to the army; 3. to build a federal democratic state that provides equality among all citizens by recognizing the autonomy of oppressed ethnic minority groups. After observing the mass protests in Hong Kong in 2019 and Thailand in 2020, during which the three-fingered hand gesture was widely used, the salute was translated to the local context as an anti-dictatorship symbol.

The General Strike Coordination Body played a central role by working together with Strike Committees across the country. These committees were formed by student organizations,



trade unions, political groups and parties, and civil servants taking part in the civil disobedience movement. They were instrumental in communicating campaign messages and symbols to a wider public. On 22 February, shops and markets were shut down in the whole country to participate in the protest. Professionals from different sectors such as engineers, nurses, teachers, railway workers, and the national football team all wore their uniforms in the streets. The union of poets, film industry workers, the cartoonists' association, and other visual artists came out with their creative campaign ideas.

Poets gathered to recite poems in downtown areas of Yangon, Mandalay, and Monywa throughout February 2021. Monywa, the second biggest city in Upper Myanmar, lost many poets during the first year of revolution from attacks by the army. Khet Thi, who was killed by the police during interrogation, once lamented:

ဒီတိုက်ပွဲ အောင်ပါပြီရှင်
နိုင်ငံရဲနဲ့ ဝေးဝေးနေမယ်
ကမ်းဖီဆိုင်လေး ဖွင့်မယ်
ဆိုင်နာမည်ကို ပြောတတ်သစ် လှိုပေးမယ်
ဆိုင်လာတဲ့ Gen Z တွေကို လက်ဆောင်တွပေးမယ်

*Once we win this battle,
I will stay away from politics.
I will open a small coffee place.
I'll label it A New Nation,
and give away gifts to GenZ
when they pay a visit.*

Like him, there were many celebrities who longed for a new democratic nation and the end of the military regime. Along the Sule Pagoda Street in Yangon, the crowd cheered on famous writers, poets, film stars, and theatrical performers who showed up and argued that the military had



been the fundamental cause of political conflicts and the lack of peace in this country. Not far from the celebrities' corner, at Sule Square, student unions occupied the whole junction. You could hear speeches of the trade unions and see the red flag featuring a fighting peacock, a symbol of student activism since the colonial days and now a symbol of the mass resistance movement. As the backdrop, a black banner was hanged on the flyover featuring a phrase from Karl Marx's and Friedrich Engel's *Communist Manifesto* "You have nothing to lose but your chains!".

The birth of the Civil Disobedience Movement

For public mobilization, open calls on social media as well as secret chats on encrypted communication channels are important. Facebook and Twitter were the main platforms on which the daily protest sites were announced. Security alerts were spread on private groups, including secret chats on Signal and Messenger. When mobile data was cut off to hamper the coordination of street protests, protesters taught each other to use other tools such as Bridgefy and Briar. To overcome the internet shutdown, SIM cards from Thailand on which international roaming was still possible were smuggled across the border.

Many local civil society groups, which held some emergency communication resources, also provided paid VPN connections to the key activists and social mobilizers.

Thanks to the community-based organizations, which had grown in number over the last ten years, a nationwide social movement appeared in no time thanks to the existing social networks. Later, they also quickly transformed themselves into support groups for civil servants who took part in Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a general strike mobilization spearheaded by hundreds of

thousands of civil servants. The massive support for CDM angered the military even more. When the nearly 400,000 civil servants that took part in CDM nearly collapsed the public sector, the military saw CDM as a form of revenge led by the NLD as opposed to being the voice of discontent from the public. They started chasing and arresting the CDMers. Support was needed to facilitate temporary safe houses and finances to ensure mobility. On the streets and on digital platforms, people used a range of methods for crowdfunding. Artists sold their art works with proceeds going to the CDM fund, while students and parents teamed up to support their teachers. The civil disobedience movement included more than just civil servants. Many media personalities and artists from the entertainment industry who joined CDM abstained from appearing in those media outlets. Celebrities who collaborated with the Junta faced consumer boycotts of ordinary citizens, as well as sanction policies of companies, who stopped hiring them for commercial public relations.

Shutting the door to protest, opening it to armed revolution

The festive atmosphere of protests with their collective chanting of slogans, music bands, street performances by Generation Z, and public charity came to an end in late March 2021. It is then that the killing spree of the military began. When soldiers attacked the protesters with water cannons, tear gas, live ammunition, sound grenades, and then real bullets, protesters still tried to resist as much as they could. Although the severe forms of attack increased day by day until late April, people from my ward took to the street every day just as millions of others in the city, building barricades on important street corners to block the security forces from attacking the residential areas and protest groups. On many of the protest sites, including the intersection near my house, women of all ages from the neighbourhood took care of the protesters with every possible means including scout, food, water, and soaked cloth-



ing to mitigate the effects of smoke bombs. Young men and women, not fearing possible injuries or even death, came out to protest every day. Every day, they wrote down their blood type and the phone number of loved ones on their forearms, and risked their lives in bloody battles against the junta's army. Likewise, in many cities night protests were organized as mass prayers, where people came together with candle lights and flowers to mourn the fallen heroes and to demand an end to the impunity enjoyed by the army. The prayers were not answered, and the military reign of terror pushed many thousands of young people to take arms and receive military training from ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) who sided with the people's movement. Myanmar has around 20 ethnic armed organizations and only half of them entered into the ceasefire agreement with the



previous governments. All of them, both individually and collectively, strongly condemned the coup and some actively collaborated with the newly formed resistance forces for armed struggle. With the technical support of these EAOs, new insurgent groups were formed across the country, and they call themselves People's Defence Forces. Majority of these armed groups took an oath of allegiance to the parallel government, called the National Unity Government, which was formed in April 2021. The coup council declared it a terrorist organization and arrested anyone who was suspected of giving support to this new government. Although taking up arms was not an option for many of those who showed up on the streets at the beginning of the coup, they still carried out different tasks which included fundraising, logistical support, providing informal education to CDM students, or giving humanitarian aid to the people affected by war. In the face of brutal

repression, people had to make adjustments in terms of strategy. A new focus of action turned to virtual campaigns calling for targeted economic sanctions from foreign countries and boycott actions from investors in natural resource extraction as well as other economic activities. Additionally, flash mob protests happened almost every day, in both rural and urban areas. Sometimes they carried a banner with a phrase by Pablo Neruda "You can cut all the flowers, but you cannot keep spring from coming."

Illustrations

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