

Section 7. Specific Forms of Solidarity

Chapter 14. Will sanctions work again in Myanmar?

More than a year after the Myanmar military coup, it is time to intensify international diplomatic, political and economic actions, defeat the junta, and put the country back on the path toward democracy. It also time for like-minded countries to agree on a unitary diplomatic strategy towards both the junta and its supporters, particularly Russia and China, who are standing in the way of a binding arms embargo at the UN Security Council (Charbonneau, 2022).

February 2022 marked one year since Myanmar's armed forces took power and declared martial law in Mandalay and Yangon, both major industrial hubs producing clothes worn by many Westerners. In March, it was one year since 150 000 to 200 000 workers fled Yangon in the face of random killings, arbitrary arrests and arson attacks.

Those who ran had a hard time getting back to their villages. The military had set up checkpoints on the roads and travellers were harassed, searched and detained. Those who made it home found little safety in the backcountry. The army was attacking rural areas as well, devastating religious sites and launching airstrikes on the armed groups struggling to defend civilians. In Khatea, a village in Shan State, inhabitants were blindfolded, bound, and forced to walk in front of troops as human shields.

To escape from these crises and oppression, uprooting the military regime completely is the only way.

A human rights catastrophe

The junta has generated millions of unemployed workers and displaced people. It has also targeted trade unions, a key force in the mobilisation of the nonviolent opposition, and prohibited the freedom of assembly and association. There have been numerous incidents of trade unionists being detained, injured, or killed during protests.

The situation compelled the ILO's Governing Body to express, last June:

profound concern over ongoing practices of the military authorities including the large-scale use of lethal violence and the use of forced labour, as well as the harassment, ongoing intimidation, arrests and detentions of trade unionists and others, including the Rohingya, for exercising their human rights, and called on the military authorities to cease immediately such activities, and to release from detention and drop any charges against trade unionists, who have peacefully participated in protest activities. (ILO 2021)

A report from the UN Human Rights Council late last year put it even more succinctly: 'The coup has evolved into a human rights catastrophe that shows no signs of abating' (UNHRC 2021).

After a year of stalemate in international action, the Burmese people asked the international community to stand up to tighten sanctions to strangle the military junta and the resources that feed it. There is no more time to waste. The people in Myanmar are starving.

Those who oppose increasing sanctions on the grounds that they will worsen the already dire humanitarian situation overlook the peculiarity of the Burmese case: sanctions have been repeatedly requested by the Myanmar political and social opposition. They would be imposed on Myanmar in accordance with our will rather than by foreign governments alone, giving them strong legitimacy. And, in the past, they have been effective. Myanmar people are already boycotting products made by military-owned companies and refusing to pay electricity bills and other taxes in order to shorten the lifespan of this dictatorship. They are ready to accept further sacrifices, including those made necessary by comprehensive economic sanctions, and believe restrictive measures must be generalised. Effective international restrictions heed the people's call

Sanctions last time

In 1997, during the last military government, the ILO published a report accusing the junta of widespread and systematic exploitation of forced labour. It drew on more than 10 000 pages of data, including interviews with victims, witnesses and trade unions, to highlight the impunity with which government officials and military officers used forced labour as a tool to intimidate and rule the country.

Spurred by the reality that was captured in the ILO's report, the Federation of Burmese Trade Unions, FTUB, and several other groups launched a campaign against the presence of multinationals in Myanmar. We want-

ed them to leave the country and take their investment with them. This campaign caused important companies such as Pepsi, Heineken, Texaco, Sony Eriksson, Reebok and Levi's to leave the country. Trade unions also filed a complaint with the European Commission (EC), and the EC agreed to suspend the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) for Myanmar in response to its systematic violation of human rights.

In June 2000, the ILO conference furthermore approved a resolution recommending to 'the Organization's constituents that they review their relations with Myanmar and take appropriate measures to ensure that such relations do not perpetuate or extend the system of forced or compulsory labour in that country' and invited 'the Director-General of the ILO to inform international organizations, working with the ILO, to reconsider any cooperation they may be engaged in with Myanmar and, if appropriate, to cease as soon as possible any activity that could have the effect of directly or indirectly abetting the practice of forced or compulsory labour' (ILO 2000).

Sanctions began to be adopted, but due to the time-consuming nature of government decision making, most key economic sanctions were adopted after the repression of the 2007 Zaffron revolution and the approval of the 2008 constitution. Nevertheless, through a strong mixture of sanctions, negotiation with the ILO and political pressure, the military junta passed the baton to the semi-civil government, enabling the start of a new chapter.

Today's demands are in line with that history

The choice we must make

On 7 October 2021, the EU parliament adopted a strong resolution requesting the EU council to freeze assets, block transfers to state-owned banks and place the state-owned Myanmar Oil and Gas Enterprise on the sanctions list. This enterprise is, according to the resolution, 'the junta's single largest foreign currency inflow'.

These decisions responded in part to the call for comprehensive economic sanctions launched by 200 civil society organisations in Myanmar. To illustrate the breadth of the coalition making this call, it included the Labour Alliance comprising 16 labour organisations, nurses' organisations, women's organisations, university student unions, teachers' unions, the Printing and Publishing Workers' Union, the Electricity Distribution Workers' Union, the Myanmar Railways Workers' Union, various medical networks and the LGBT Alliance. These groups, and many more, are all requesting comprehensive economic sanctions.

The 183 signatory organisations are aware of the concern that previous sanctions on Myanmar had negative humanitarian impacts. In response, the signatory organisations wrote:

We understand that Comprehensive Economic Sanctions (CES) can cost millions of jobs in Myanmar and possibly further decimate the situation in the country. However, the long-term presence of the military will only worsen and prolong human rights and workers' rights violations, forced labour issues, unemployment, food shortages, refugee crisis, and other oppressions. To escape from these crises and oppression, uprooting the military regime completely is the only way. Comprehensive Economic Sanctions (CES) can destroy pillars of the military, and shorten their lifespan. Therefore, it is the choice we must make, to build a new federal democracy, that people desire.

These organisations are asking international institutions and governments, including the EU and USA, to block international financial and insurance services, paralyze airports and docks and strangle trade in arms, petrochemicals and other natural resources. To be effective, sanctions must be comprehensive and ban all commercial activities with the Myanmar regime. Combined with diplomatic action toward China, Russia, and other governments feeding the junta, it will be possible to starve the regime and drive it out. All governments should understand that only a democratically-elected government can stabilise the country and bring prosperity for all.

Governments and international organisations should listen to the Burmese voices currently calling for international sanctions. The Industrial Workers' Federation Of Myanmar, which is leading the Comprehensive Economic Sanctions campaign, had been working for a year to oppose the military coup, with strikes and demonstrations that saw workers, and particularly women, in the forefront. They deserve to be heard. And they know that sanctions will hit their country hard. But they are asking for them anyway because, when they did so in the past, their heeded calls helped topple the junta government.

Alone, though, sanctions are insufficient. To overcome the stalemate, they must be accompanied by strong diplomatic action that brings ASEAN, China, Russia, the EU and the USA to the table with the National Unity Government of Myanmar to envisage a possible way out. This must also be accompanied by a decision at the UN Security Council on an arms embargo. Only when the big decision makers join hands can the junta be defeated and the transition toward a real democracy be started once again.

References

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