

# **“Five Twos” - Burma: success of the general strike against the junta**

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**The success of February 22<sup>nd</sup> shows that the resistance movement against military rule has grown even stronger.**

The Civil Disobedience Movement called for this one-day general strike, three weeks after the February 1 coup. Media reports confirm the success: across the country, offices, businesses, markets, shops and restaurants were closed. Neighbourhoods were barricaded, roads were cut.

The military junta had tried to prevent this success by increasing its repression. There were more than 400 arrests. Sometimes, live ammunition was used. In Naypyidaw, the administrative capital, a 19-year-old grocer Mya Thwet Thwet Khine was killed. Her burial was followed by a long motorcade. A protest in her memory was held in Rangoon (Yangon), the business capital and largest city. This assassination radicalized the protest.

Another large protest took place in the port of Mandalay, where security forces shot dead two people, while trying to force strikers refusing to load a ship to work.

On Monday, February 22, the military took preventative measures deploying tanks, erecting barricades and positioning military convoys to close access to urban centres. This did not deter the demonstrators who dismantled the barricades or gathered in front of the soldiers.

Right from the start, the resistance to this coup has brought together a wide range of people, with healthcare workers and the educated youth of Generation Z at the forefront. The movement also gathers powerful formal or informal associations of public sector workers, private employees, entrepreneurs and traders. The opposition has spread to new groups and new regions over the last three weeks. A union led by women in an industrial area in Rangoon is helping to amplify protests in the city centre. LGBT groups are very active. A peasant mobilization is taking shape. (Some) police officers side with the demonstrators. Buddhist monks are showing their support (but the religious establishment is not). The demonstrators have chosen non-violence, combining “fluid” actions and massive static gatherings. Overall, despite isolated incidents, there appears to have been no brutal repression to date.

The resistance quickly acquired a framework for coordination: the Civil Disobedience Movement. This aims to ensure the continuation of the struggle over time and in solidarity. Striking in Burma is not without consequences. Even civil servants (public sector employees) find themselves without income; there are no unions and strike funds able to support them. If the struggle fails, it is their job that is at stake. Many local initiatives have been taken, often by well-known personalities, to help strikers’ families by providing accommodation, food, etc. The existence of the MDC has facilitated this mutual aid, even if it is only a partial and temporary answer.

The creation of the MDC is one of the striking differences from the previous massive movement against the military order, initiated on August 8, 1988 by students, lawyers, doctors and – also then –

civil servants. That movement was opposed to the “socialist” and dictatorial regime of General Ne Win. In 1980s Burma, the word “socialist” certainly did not have the meaning generally accorded to it. Back then, the junta defined its’ vision as “socialist and anti-communist”.

Nobody in Burma can forget the massacre of 3,000 or more in 1988. But history is not doomed to repeat itself. Protesters insist that this new “Five Twos” movement (for 22.02.2021) will be much bigger than the old “Four Eights” movement (for 08.08.1988). The country is no longer isolated. Nowadays the military commands two powerful economic conglomerates whose profits depend on regional trade (Singapore is the largest source of foreign investment). The training of today’s senior officers, including General Min Aung Hlaing, is quite different from the training of the officer corps under Ne Win.

The February 1 coup shows that the military does not want to give up any of its power. But, faced with the power of popular mobilization, the military might try to play for time rather than unleash a bloodbath. Either way, there is no turning back. The determination of the movement reflects the feeling that there is no acceptable outcome other than victory - and that victory is possible this time!

**Pierre Rousset**

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**P.S.**

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