

How Myanmar's post-coup violence is transforming a generation

Thursday 8 April 2021, by [Thin Lei Win](#) (Date first published: 7 April 2021).

Bloodshed leads to soul-searching in majority Burman community

YANGON — The arson attacks and evening raids by soldiers and police that followed Myanmar's Feb. 1 coup gave 25-year-old Cho a glimpse of what life must be like in parts of the country where the military has waged war for decades.

"Since the coup, whenever I meet up with friends, we talked about ... how we never realized how badly the soldiers were behaving in these areas," said Cho, a Yangon-based worker for female empowerment, noting how ashamed she feels now about her past ignorance.

"We said injustice is now at our door because we ignored it when it was knocking on someone else's door," she added.

This regret has been on vivid display in social media posts and a new wave of political art, as well as on placards brandished by protesters, many of them young, in street marches in recent weeks.

One confessional poster inspired by "First They Came," a famous post-World War II poem by Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller, said the military is now coming for everyone because of a collective failure to speak out when atrocities were committed against the Karen and the Rohingya minorities. Among many viral images of the protests is one of a lone protester in a busy intersection in Yangon with a sign: "I really regret abt Rohingya crisis."

Thurein Hlaing Win, 32, a trained doctor and veteran journalist, said he used to wonder whether the army had really committed some of the atrocities reported against minority ethnic groups — particularly Rohingya Muslims — because they sounded so cruel.

"We [have seen] how brutal and inhumane the military is even in cities where there's a strong media presence and everyone could see what they were doing. I thought, 'How inhumane would they be in a place without media and towards a group for whom they harbor hatred?'"

On a single day in early April, the junta charged 18 celebrities, journalists and influencers who spoke out against the coup with violating an article in the Penal Code, punishable by up to three years in jail. Thurein Hlaing Win is on the list.

Over the past two months, Myanmar's military rulers have turned to increasingly vicious methods to suppress dissent, seen in the sustained shooting, killing and arrests by security forces of unarmed civilians and terrorizing of communities with public beatings, forced labor and nightly assaults.

As of April 6, at least 550 civilians had been killed by security forces since the coup — 114 of them on a single day, March 27, when the military marked its Armed Forces Day with a wave of savagery and a vast parade of weaponry. Among the victims have been at least 40 children, some as young as

7 years old, while those suffering serious injuries included a 1-year-old girl who was hit with a rubber bullet.

Such ruthlessness has dampened the large-scale, anti-coup protests that had been occurring across Myanmar since Feb. 1, but it has also triggered some profound soul-searching among the Burman community, the country's mainly Buddhist majority ethnic group, which accounts for nearly 70% of the population.

Most Burmans live in the geographical center of the country, and before the coup largely ignored the plight of minority groups in the mountainous and coastal areas. Despite the country's wealth of natural resources, ethnic groups fare worse in almost every development indicator, from poverty and education to infrastructure and life expectancy, and have been ravaged by conflicts between ethnic armed forces and Myanmar's military.

Many have since apologized for their failure to speak out earlier, including student unions at the two medical colleges in Yangon and an engineering university in Mandalay.

Now, hopes are rising that this transformation, pushed by a younger generation of protesters, could lead to a peaceful and united future in a country where more than half of the population is below 30 years of age.

Myanmar, which is about the same size as France and Britain combined, has not known sustained peace since gaining independence from the U.K. in 1948, largely because of conflict between the military and a large number of ethnic armed groups fighting for regional independence or autonomy.

"The coup was like a slap on the cheek of someone who's nodding off. We've been woken up," said Zaw, 23, who, like Cho and Thurein Hlaing Win, is a Burman Buddhist.

"It wasn't like my mind changed 180 degrees. But I realized my previous knowledge was shallow. I was disgusted with myself."

Cho, who asked to be referred to by a nickname to avoid possible reprisals, agreed. "Most of our social circle are Bamar (Burman) from Yangon, and privileged. We were just preoccupied with our own lives and didn't think of helping others. Almost everyone I know regrets this," she said.

Thurein Hlaing Win recently posted a public apology on Facebook for his previous opinions. It garnered more than 8,000 likes and over 1,000 shares. A similar post from Ei Pencilo, a supporter of the deposed National League for Democracy government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and a Facebook personality with 2.3 million followers, received 83,000 likes in less than two days and more than 9,000 shares.

An informal Twitter poll also found that 95% of thousands of respondents said the coup has made them more sympathetic toward minorities, including the Rohingya, many of whom fled the western state of Rakhine following an army crackdown.

Khin Zaw Win, a Yangon-based political analyst, said that after years of working on minority issues, he had to accept that change in social attitudes would come slowly. But now, he said, he is more hopeful. "I tell everyone (including myself) that it's going to take time. ... The coup aftermath has been an unexpected windfall," he said.

Hello [#Myanmar](#) folks on twitter. Can you please answer these two questions? Thank you! (1/2)

1. Has the coup make you more sympathetic to the struggles faced by minority ethnic groups in Myanmar? [#WhatsHappeningInMyanmar](#)

— Thin (@thinink) [March 26, 2021](#)

Sonny Swe, publisher of Frontier Myanmar magazine, a recipient of regional press awards, expressed a similar view. “What’s happening right now is not good, but if you look at it overall, these are positive signs,” he said. “People’s eyes and ears have opened. So if there is a chance to restart I think the future is very, very bright for this country, especially for the young generation.”

For decades, Myanmar’s minority ethnic groups, estimated to account for about 30% of the population of 54 million, were forced to accept government centered around the language, culture, religion and education of the Burman majority, which controls the main levers of government, including Myanmar’s military, known as the Tatmadaw.

Derogatory stereotypes present minority groups as troublesome, uneducated and conflict-prone, while school syllabuses are filled with the glories of the Burman kings, who ruled Myanmar, formerly known as Burma, before British colonial occupation in the 19th century.

“The army had spent many years spreading the propaganda that [minority ethnic groups including Rohingya] are terrorists and saboteurs,” said Swe Win, editor-in-chief of Myanmar Now, an independent news outlet that has reported extensively on the Tatmadaw’s activities.

“So while people hate the military dictatorship (which preceded the NLD government elected in 2015) they still believed some of the propaganda. But now the bullets have hit their homes, and what’s happening is no longer about breaking up protests but [the junta] murdering civilians to bring the public to their knees,” he added.

A similar shift in opinion is occurring within the NLD, the country’s biggest political party.

The main opposition body after the coup, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, established by elected NLD lawmakers unable to take their parliamentary seats, voted to remove all ethnic armed organizations from the country’s list of terrorist groups and unlawful associations and to abolish the country’s 2008 constitution, a key demand of ethnic communities.

The CRPH’s special envoy to the United Nations, Salai Maung Taing San, also known as Dr. Sasa, has promised to deliver justice for the Rohingya — a stark departure from the position taken in government by Suu Kyi, who defended the military’s treatment of the Muslim minority.

Kim Joliffe, an independent researcher who works closely with minority ethnic groups, sees these developments as positive because, he said, the Tatmadaw has been “very good” at ensuring that pro-democracy and ethnic movements do not work together.

“Now there’s a real basis for everybody who has been oppressed to turn on the oppressor together. That’s really powerful. If that can last, then it will be extremely difficult for the Tatmadaw to maintain its rule in the way it has,” he said.

Even if the army stays in power, political alliances that have been formed since the coup are unlikely to disappear, particularly because they developed so publicly, he added.

Ethnic activists and protesters are also cautiously optimistic about efforts to bring about systemic change, despite the experience of five years of NLD-led government in which ethnic minority parties

were sidelined.

"This is the opportunity for CRPH to do things differently ... not by seeing ethnic stakeholders as entities just to support them, but to lean on each other, to coordinate, collaborate and lead together," said Stella Naw, who became an activist in 2011 after witnessing human rights violations, including rape and arbitrary killings, in her home state of Kachin.

"It warms my heart to see the Bamar Buddhists saying, 'Now we know what it feels like to have gone through what other ethnic communities have gone through at the hands of the military. We're sorry we never speak out, or stand up for you,'" she said, her voice filled with emotion.

"While I appreciate and value what is happening ... I think we still need time for structural change, because for [the Burmans], whose cultural, religious and ethnic identity has been framed to them as, 'You're better,' it will take time to change," she added.

Changing the school curriculum and providing extracurricular activities focused on ethnicity and social science could be a start, said Naw Wut Yee, an anti-coup protester from the Karen ethnic group.

"There were [minority] ethnic people involved in building this country, but all we were taught was that [the Burman] people are great; they fight against the colonial masters," she said.

"I feel happy and positive but not fully confident because ... people still need education on why minorities have trust issues," she added. "They [Burmans] want a federal army and a federal constitution but that doesn't happen in a day. They don't even understand why ethnic minorities couldn't accept Aung San Suu Kyi as their democratic leader or icon."

Theo Htet, a Burman Buddhist working in Singapore, believes the anti-coup movement is already expanding beyond the NLD.

"In the beginning it was very much about NLD ... but it slowly evolved. What I could see from my close circle and all the comments on Facebook is [that] they start to understand more about ethnic people," he said.

Recently, one of his tweets asking people to describe their vision of a future Myanmar elicited 700 responses, ranging from equitable sharing of natural resources and a federal democracy to a new flag.

Theo Htet, who joined Twitter only in February, and was not previously politically active, said the responses inspired him. "[The coup] is terrible, but this is also like an awakening for all of us. I'm now more hopeful for Myanmar than before. Before this, it was kind of stagnant," he added.

The growing harmony between ethnic groups has also created a new path for the country, because before, people wanted to abolish military dictatorship but were less clear of what could take its place, said Swe Win.

"What needs to be substituted should not be based on race or religion but on justice and the opportunity to live a dignified life peacefully and without fear. People now understand these universal values are critical," he said.

In light of the junta's recent moves to suspend broadband Wi-Fi services, there is a danger the country could go dark or descend into full-scale civil war. But if the coup is reversed, there is much to be hopeful for, Swe Win said, noting: "I see that we now have the strength to build a society based

on universal human rights.”

Thin Lei Win

[*Click here*](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Nikkei Asia

<https://asia.nikkei.com/Life-Arts/Life/How-Myanmar-s-post-coup-violence-is-transforming-a-generation>