

Guest Column

Notes From Myanmar's Underground

Sunday 12 September 2021, by [Naing Khit](#) (Date first published: 10 September 2021).

Contents

- [Grim math](#)
- [Unprecedented scale](#)
- [Continuing the struggle](#)

Myanmar is increasingly becoming a nation underground. You could almost call it a nationwide game of “hide-and-seek”. But of course this game has potentially fatal consequences. Being found means arrest, torture and even death.

It has been many months since I went into hiding. Those who have experienced it will agree with what I am going to say here: There is no such thing as the perfect hideout. They know, as I do, that no one feels truly safe in any hideout, no matter how well chosen.

I have discovered, however, that these worry-filled days all have one reliably good moment: the minute one wakes in the morning.

I feel relief to the point of bliss upon waking up in my bed to the realization that I have made it through one more night without being arrested—that, quite simply, I still find myself a free person.

Here in Myanmar, I am not alone in my plight. It has become the daily reality for so many people across the country over the past seven months, since the military suddenly seized power from an elected government on Feb. 1.



Junta troops patrol in Yangon on Feb. 2, 2021. / The Irrawaddy

The list of targeted groups is quite extensive—dissidents, anti-regime protesters, young resistance fighters, critics and journalists, civil servants participating in the Civil Disobedience Movement (known as the CDM), doctors and teachers, famous actors and actresses, artists and singers, and too many more to name. Their family members—wives and husbands, children and other relatives—are also often targeted for arrest, held as hostages by the regime. The one thing they have in common is that they are all active against the regime in some way.

They have all gone into hiding to escape being arrested arbitrarily, hideously tortured, slapped with irrational charges, handed lengthy terms of imprisonment and even killed.

Physically and mentally, hiding from the junta's deadly squads is an experience like no other. This is not the thrill of wondering whether you'll evade discovery that one remembers from childhood games—it's a feeling of constant dread.

Grim math

The number of people who have gone into hiding or fled their homes is likely very significant, at least in the thousands, but possibly in the hundreds of thousands if we include everyone who has some reason to evade persecution by the regime. The number of civil servants refusing to work for the regime is about 400,000 across the country, and many of them are in hiding, or at least keeping a low profile, to avoid potential arrest. That's just a single category out of many.

Over the past seven months, the military regime led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has, as of Sept. 10, arrested 8,013 people who belong to one or another of the categories mentioned above, of whom 6,364 remain in detention, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), a rights group that daily documents the regime's arrests and killings. Based on its latest count, the regime has killed 1,062 dissidents, anti-regime protesters, students and rights activists, doctors and nurses, and even poets. Some of them were arbitrarily killed a few hours after being arrested at their homes or hideouts.

If we do the math, the military regime has arrested more than 1,000 people per month, or more than 30 people every day, on average.

Manhunt operations have become a nightly routine almost everywhere across Myanmar under the military regime. Unknown and well-known individuals alike are rounded up.

On Sept. 1, Daw Khin San Hlaing, an elected lawmaker of the National League for Democracy (NLD), was arrested while hiding in Yangon. Likewise, political columnist U Sithu Aung Myint and a reporter from BBC Media Action were arrested on Aug. 15 in their hiding places in the city.

For the lawmaker, who is in her 60s, release is out of the question, as most of the 300 of her NLD colleagues who are currently in detention—party leaders, ministers, elected lawmakers and other members—are facing lengthy terms of imprisonment after being hit with multiple charges by the regime.



Downtown Yangon on Feb. 23, 2021 / The Irrawaddy

The columnist is also facing life in prison on sedition charges for being critical of the military regime and for allegedly backing the shadow National Unity Government formed by elected lawmakers of the NLD and their ethnic allies after the coup. Prior to his arrest, the regime arrested 95 journalists and media staff, around 50 of whom remain in prison.

Any arrest can lead to death due to the brutal torture practiced by the regime's troops. As of the end of August, the AAPP reported that at least 110 people had been killed in custody. In early

September, at least one more person was tortured to death right after his arrest. On Sept. 6, Ko Zaw Linn Htet, 30, was detained in connection with a student union in Pyay, Bago Region, at 3:30 p.m. At around 8 p.m., authorities informed his family that he was dead.

So, finding a safe hideout is crucial. If you can't hide securely, it could cost you your life. If you are captured and lucky enough not to be tortured to death, you will at the very least suffer inhumane treatment initially, followed soon after by harsh imprisonment.

Hiding in conflict zones is another level of ordeal. Since late March, in all regions and states of the country except Rakhine State, tens of thousands of villagers have had to flee their homes due to clashes between civilian resistance fighters and regime troops, which began after the military violently cracked down on peaceful demonstrations organized in response to the coup.

Villages in those areas have been raided and houses ransacked by the regime's troops. Many people have been forced to hide in forests without food or even rudimentary shelter. Last month, UNHCR's Myanmar Emergency Update reported that approximately 211,000 people have been internally displaced in the country since the coup.

Unprecedented scale

Myanmar has suffered numerous dark eras, especially under the military and authoritarian dictatorships that have existed since 1962, but it is doubtful there have ever been so many people hiding in so many places—from the biggest cities like Yangon and Mandalay to the tiniest villages in inland and border areas—as there are now.

After the late dictator General Ne Win staged his first coup in 1962, civilian government leaders, politicians, ethnic leaders and anti-regime students were arrested. Some regime opponents doubtless went into hiding but the number was relatively insignificant.

However, during and after the military's second coup d'état following the nationwide democracy uprising in 1988, the numbers of arrests and deaths were much higher, and the regime's manhunts were on a much larger scale. Several thousand pro-democracy activists and politicians were arrested. Furthermore, about 10,000 students and pro-democracy activists fled to take up arms in the border areas to fight the junta. Many activists who chose to continue their anti-regime activities inside the country were forced to hide to avoid the regime's manhunts. However, many of them ended up in jail at one time or another throughout the military regime presided over by Senior General Than Shwe, who appointed the current coup maker, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, as the commander-in-chief of the military when he stepped down in 2011.

Many dissidents and politicians were unable to stay hidden for long periods, as the military regime's intelligence apparatus became quite effective at directing the search operations. The Military Intelligence unit (known simply as "MI") became the most feared institution in Myanmar society. Under spy chief General Khin Nyunt, dubbed the "Prince of Evil", the MI was the junta's main mechanism for hunting, arresting and imprisoning political dissidents across the country. Under his directives, the MI arrested thousands of young students and politicians after 1988; at any given time, the country's prisons housed a couple of thousand political prisoners. As his MI was mainly responsible for the oppression of political dissidents, he was widely seen as the main villain of the previous military regime, after its chief, Snr-Gen Than Shwe. (The fact that Khin Nyunt was purged from the regime in 2004 and sentenced to 44 years of house arrest—later commuted—after his boss Than Shwe began to perceive him as a rival hasn't softened the public's opinion of him.)

In the 1990s and 2000s, the MI's systematic and oppressive scrutiny of the pro-democracy movement across Myanmar forced many dissidents to flee the country to avoid arrest and arbitrary imprisonment. The legacy of that persecution is the significant community of Myanmar exiles living abroad, especially in Western countries including the United States and European countries, many of which granted political asylum to Myanmar dissidents.

Continuing the struggle

The reason people engaged in anti-regime activities chose to go into hiding at that time is the same one that motivates those actively involved in the current Spring Revolution: to survive in order to continue, each by their respective chosen means, their mission to end the country's decades-long military dictatorship.

Those currently in hiding from the regime's squads can at least be thankful that Khin Nyunt and his once-powerful MI have been gone from the scene for more than a decade. Those in hiding today would find it much more difficult if such a mechanism were still extant and under his directives.



People gather at Yangon's Sule junction to show opposition to the military coup on Feb. 7, 2021. / The Irrawaddy

But the current military regime under Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing is more ruthless in terms of the number of those arrested, and the number of those tortured and killed in custody. The numbers of those arrested and killed over the past seven months are higher than those under the previous military regime—8,013 arrested and 1,062 killed as of Sept. 10.

In the absence of the MI, the current junta relies on an extensive network of informants—infamously known as “Da-lan” in Burmese—to enable their manhunt operations.

To kill the democracy that the majority of Myanmar people are fighting for, the junta has to kill democracy activists and defenders, or at least their strong spirits. To do this, the regime's troops are unearthing these dedicated people from their hideouts every night. That's their deadly duty; ours is to keep ourselves free and alive. But that's not our ultimate aim.

Day to day, we hide in order to survive as free individuals. But there is a larger goal, a higher reason: to continue the struggle to rid Myanmar of the present military regime, and to end the system of dictatorship once and for all.

Perhaps there are many others like me, sitting in their hideouts across this country, anxiously hoping they wake up tomorrow morning as free people.

That's why.

Naing Khit

P.S.

- The Irrawaddy, 10 September 2021:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/guest-column/notes-from-myanmars-underground.html>
- Naing Khit is a commentator on political affairs.