

Burma

Criticized, Myanmar's Influential Monk Close to Coup Leader Breaks Silence on Killing Protesters - Others don't

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Yangon—One of Myanmar's most influential Buddhist monks has finally broken his silence over the military's brutal assaults on anti-regime protesters.

Sitagu Sayadaw, who is close to the coup's leader, has joined other monks in calling on the junta to stop killing unarmed people.

Initially known for his fiery sermons against previous military regimes from 1988 to the early 2000s, Sitagu Sayadaw these days sings a different tune.

When the quasi-civilian government led by former generals was in power from 2011 to early 2016, the monk publicly said he wished the then President U Thein Sein would be re-elected. Since that time, the monk, who is also known as Ashin Nyanissara, was seen by some people as someone sitting on the fence.

Later, Myanmar's military chief Senior General Min Aung Hliang—now the coup leader—became a familiar face among his high-level followers.

When the regime's troops opened fire on protesters across the country in opposition to the coup, killing about 50 people following the coup on Feb. 1, the 84-year old monk was tight lipped. That was in stark contrast to his actions more than 30 years ago.

People, including his long-time followers, were broken hearted and questioned his silence over the civilian killings.

They dropped comments at his Facebook page, saying, "They are killing people. Please stop them."

Some went further: "Staying tight lipped make you sleep well, Sayadaw?"

Some followers who had held him in high esteem for his previous anti-dictatorship activism simply questioned whether the monk's silence this time meant he was supporting the generals who launched the coup.



Military's chief Senior General Min Aung Hlaing and his wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla are seen with Sitagu Sayartaw after making a donation to Sitagu International Buddhist Academy in 2019. Photo- State owned newspaper

"I feel really sad to see the religious mentor I once much believed in has turned this way," one wrote.

By expressing great concern about the crackdown, the nine leading monks of Shwe Kyin Sect, including Sitagu Sayadaw, on Thursday urged coup leader Min Aung Hlaing to immediately stop the deadliest assaults on unarmed people and to avoid robbing or destroying people's property.

Shwe Kyin is one of Myanmar's nine Buddhist clergy sects; and its members are known for strictly obeying the Vinaya, the codes of conducts for Buddhist monks. Sitagu Sayadaw is the second-most influential leader of the sect.

In their statement, monks also urged the senior general to be a good Buddhist.

Another famous monk facing criticism is U Kovida, who is well-known as Vasipake Sayadaw for his practicing of silence vows. He has reportedly cut off contact with social media after facing intense criticism by Myanmar social media users for allegedly supporting the military coup.

The monk from eastern Shan State is also well known as an astrologer and for having a close relationship with Snr. Gen. Min Aung Hlaing and his wife Daw Kyu Kyu Hla.

He has been accused of providing the coup leader with his astrological advice for the takeover.

He was reportedly blamed for advising the senior general to tell security forces to shoot protesters in the head.

Most of the people killed over the last month and early this week were hit in their heads.

In February of last year, the monk was also with Min Aung Hlaing when the senior general and his wife placed the "Hti" umbrella atop Bagan's ancient Htilominlo Temple, following in the footsteps of some of Myanmar's most powerful figures including his predecessor, Senior General Than Shwe. Many people believed that the ceremony was seeking divine blessings for his kinship.

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P.S.

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