

Interview

Myanmar's revolt against the coup - "If you repress us, we will rise up even more"

vendredi 26 mars 2021, par [ME ME KHAN](#), [SMITH Ashley](#) (Date de rédaction antérieure : 22 mars 2021).

Myanmar's military carried out a coup on February 1st against the results of a democratic election. The election would have given Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy an overwhelming majority in the government. Fearing that would compromise their hold on the country, the military arrested Suu Kyi and much of the rest of the leadership of the country and imposed a military dictatorship. Their coup has triggered a mass popular uprising of enormous demonstrations and general strikes throughout the country. The military has responded with the utmost brutality, gunning down protesters and arresting untold numbers of people. Ashley Smith talked with M^e M^e Khan about the uprising for democracy. She is an activist and poet from Myanmar who is currently pursuing a masters degree in international policy at Stanford University. She is also a Knight-Hennessy Scholar.

Ashley Smith : The military has launched an all-out campaign of mass repression against the democratic uprising to defend its coup. How has the resistance responded ?

ME ME KHAN : The media has exposed the repression. Everyone has probably seen the horrific scenes of violence. The military has unleashed its forces to brutally attack and intimidate protesters. The leadership has ordered soldiers to commit these atrocities.

What's particularly disturbing has been some soldiers' public declarations that they enjoy carrying out these attacks and killings. They have posted on social media boasting that they love to do all of this, not just because they are ordered to do it. This looks like fascism.

The military itself is a fascist institution cracking down on peaceful protestors. But this repression has not driven the protesters off the streets. They are outraged. If anything, it has confirmed the illegitimacy of the military and intensified people's determination to rise up and overthrow it.

So far, the protests have been largely peaceful. People remain steadfast and calm. They have also come up with all sorts of creative tactics to resist the military and its violence.



Myanmar workers launch general strikes to oppose the military coup.

For example, one day in a particular township (North Okkala) in Yangon, the military killed and injured many people. But rather than retreat, people came out that very night with candles to pray for their dead comrades and express their ongoing commitment to the struggle.

Younger people have begun to organize to protect themselves against the brutality. They have started wearing helmets and bringing shields to demonstrations. So, the repression has not intimidated people from continuing to organize. Activists have raised the slogan, "if you repress us, we will rise up even more and if you touch us, we will fight back."

In Mandalay, there was a nineteen year old girl who was killed last week. Her murder by the military moved the entire country. Despite that atrocity, the people returned to the streets the very next day. There is no sign of the struggle retreating.



AS : Why did the military opt to carry out a coup against Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League for Democracy (NLD) after their victory in the recent election ? Why did the military do this after it had collaborated with her party for years ?

MMK : The excuse that the military gave was election fraud. Of course, we know that there are no grounds for this claim. So, there are deeper reasons for their decision to carry out the coup.

The first is that the military wants full control of the country and felt the election results showed that the further development of democracy would threaten their power.

They had control before the coup. But Aung San Suu Kyi and NLD were able to exploit loopholes in the 2008 constitution to encroach on the military's power. For example, the NLD managed to secure a position for Aung San as state counselor.

They were also able to carry out a lot of legislative reforms such as improvements in education and healthcare. And, sensing their popularity, they were pushing for more constitutional reform.

So, the military felt threatened. In particular, General Min Aung Hlaing has a personal interest in this coup. His term was going to expire, so to keep himself in power, he carried out the coup to extend his rule and control of the military.

There is a second, feminist perspective on the coup. The military is a sexist, patriarchal institution. So, they don't like to see a woman leading the country with so much popular support. That is an added dimension. But the main reason is the military's determination to hold on to power they have enjoyed since the early 1960s.

AS : What's your assessment of the NLD ? What was its economic and political project ? Is it fair to call it a bourgeois party committed to opening Myanmar to global capitalism ? What impact did its rule have on different classes and ethnic groups ?

MMK : The NLD is a party of the Bamar elite committed to democracy in Myanmar, at least in some

respects. I remember when I first could vote in 2015, I was so hopeful that the country was going to change for the better and that the NLD was going to pass reforms to transform the country.

But there were a lot of things that the NLD wasn't able to accomplish. Their political and economic project combined mild reforms with opening the national economy to global capitalism.

That advanced the interests of some sections of society, especially the upper and middle classes in the cities, who benefitted from the increased foreign direct investment. But a lot of the ethnic regions and a lot of the rural areas did not reap the fruits of these policies.

But as I said, the NLD's healthcare and education reforms were very positive. They also got COVID-19 under control and protected sections of the impoverished population who would have otherwise been devastated by the disease.

At the same time, if you look at the members of the NLD, if you look at its rhetoric and program, it is an elite party, a bourgeois nationalist party. The majority of the people who get elected are from the Bamar elite, from the wealthy and middle class, who all went to university. There is a small fraction of ethnic minority elites in the party and its elected representatives, but it is very small.

They put national unity and capitalist development first and all the issues about class and ethnic minorities last on the list of priorities. That is very typical of the liberal Bamar elite in Myanmar. Issues of exploitation and national oppression don't concern them as much as other issues.

During this revolution, though, you can see the NLD's viewpoint being challenged. Even the NLD leadership from parliament has started talking with representatives of the ethnic minority groups. Hopefully, that is a sign of deeper changes to come.

AS : One of the great disappointments with Aung San Suu Kyi's rule was her collaboration with the military in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya in Rakhine. Why did she do this ?

MMK : I asked myself the same question. I remember when she defended the military at the International Court of Justice, I was shocked. For many of us, this was the last straw. The main reason that people give to explain her support of the military was that Aung San and the NLD are a mainly Bamar elite party committed to national unity. But I think we need to come up with more than this to explain why she went along with the military's ethnic cleansing.

AS : Myanmar has been a battleground of imperial powers for a long time. Today, both the U.S. and China are angling for hegemony over it. The U.S. cultivated a relationship with Aung San Suu Kyi going back years, and China has done so more recently. How has each state responded to the coup ?

MMK : It used to be clear cut before the transition to democracy. The U.S. supported Aung San, while China had a relationship with the military. So, they were on opposing sides. But after the transition, the U.S. distanced itself from Aung San over her collaboration in the ethnic cleansing of the Rohingya.

She then tilted toward China. But both the U.S. and China have condemned the coup. China in particular is heavily invested in Belt and Road infrastructure projects in Myanmar, and instability in the country threatens their completion.

So, in a sense, China and the U.S. are on the same side. But, both China and Russia supply Myanmar's military with weapons and they also fear the crack up of the military and certainly fear a successful revolution. So, they have opposed sanctions on the country, deeming the coup an internal

matter.

But there is a rivalry between the US and China ; they have been competing for hegemony over the country for a while. Before the coup, their embassies were fighting with each other, issuing conflicting statements all the time.

But other powers are involved, too. Russia and India also have interests in the country. So global power dynamics are certainly at play as each one looks out to protect their interests against the others. The movement must, of course, remain independent of all of them and stick to its demands.

We started challenging the sexist ideas and structures of our society. That laid the groundwork for the central role played by women in this revolution. Women have come to the fore in the leadership of the union strikes and in the demonstrations.

AS : In the revolution, there are many classes and groups involved. One of the striking things about the uprising has been the prominent role of young activists and especially women, particularly working class women. What are the roots and organizations of these groups ? Why have they played such a significant role ?

MMK : The strikes have been amazing. This did not come out of nowhere. The labor unions have played a central role all the way back to the colonial period. They have played a central role in our history of struggle and revolutions.

There's a saying that I grew up with that there were three forces needed for the revolution—the students, the workers, and the monks. So, the workers have always been central.

The addition of women to the struggle is the fruit of the last several years of freedom, when a lot of young people learned feminist perspectives. A lot of feminist organizations advocated for women's empowerment and leadership.

We started challenging the sexist ideas and structures of our society. That laid the groundwork for the central role played by women in this revolution. Women have come to the fore in the leadership of the union strikes and in the demonstrations. But it's not just young women ; it's women from across generations, with older women playing a leading role as well.

The development of the International Women's Strike over the last few years has encouraged these developments in Myanmar, but its roots are very particular to the country. It has a lot to do with the movement being forced to confront the sexism of the military.

Prejudices against women run very deep in the military, as well as in our society as a whole. For example, men particularly in the military believe that if they touch women's clothing, especially the traditional longyi, it will reduce their will power or masculinity.

Women activists have exploited this. They have strung their longyi on clotheslines around protesters. Women are also marching with their longyi on picket signs to intimidate the soldiers.



Women hang longyi at anti-coup protests to intimidate the military.

AS : The working class has also played a prominent role in organizing mass strikes. While everyone supports the restoration of democracy and respect for the election, are there any signs of the working class developing its own organizations and parties as alternatives to the NLD ?

MMK : The movement was started by healthcare workers. They were then joined by teachers' unions, student unions, and garment workers. They were already all engaged in actions before the coup. So, they were positioned to lead the revolution against the military regime.

The participation of workers and oppressed groups has opened space for people to reckon with the mistakes of the NLD, like the Rohingya genocide. They also raised awareness of many other social inequalities in the country.

All of this has been expressed in the uprising. You see people from all different exploited and oppressed strata of society—women, LGBTQ, working class, poor—coming out on the protests and bringing up their issues and demands.

The common enemy—the military—has united a lot of people. Many people are well-read in terms of revolutionary literature. They are aware of class struggle and different global oppressions.

They have been speaking out against the inequalities of the global system, the legacy of colonialism, and the realities of neocolonialism. That has really amplified the struggle of ethnic minorities, workers, and women all as part of the larger fight for freedom and equality.

All of this has put pressure on The Committee Representing Pyidaungus Hluttaw (CRPH), which is the interim parallel government. It is made up for the most part of representatives from the NLD.

The movement is pushing for the CRPH to recognize ethnic oppression, abolish the 2008 constitution, and adopt demands to address the larger fight for equality and freedom.

They are putting pressure on the elite leadership to end their silence on these questions. People are beginning to question the idea that the rich should lead society just by virtue of their wealth . Working class people are out there raising demands not just for the restoration of democracy, but greater equality.



“Undaunting Spring” by M^e M^e Khan

AS : How have different ethnic groups responded to the coup ? Has the uprising laid the foundation for greater solidarity between the Bamar majority and oppressed ethnic minorities ?

MMK : The situation is really complicated. The ethnic armed organizations have been largely silent, except for a few that have condemned the coup. But a lot of people from the ethnic groups, including the Rohingya, have joined the mass movement.

That has shifted the perception of the Bamar. A lot of people are coming out and apologizing for staying silent about their struggle. That is one of the beautiful things we are seeing in the midst of this uprising.

This awareness had been growing among young people even before the coup. But now more people, including older ones loyal to the NLD, are developing more awareness. So, I think there is growing unity across these ethnic divisions in this movement.

At the same time, the ethnic military organizations and parties have not joined the struggle. Some have even colluded with the military. So, we have a contradictory situation.

There are sharp divisions between organized forces, while there is potential unity in the struggle itself. But we have a long way to go in overcoming ethnic oppression.

If you look at the states in the Association of South-East Asian Nations, it's practically a dictator's club. So, any revolt in one of them puts all of them at risk...We see the fight in Myanmar as not just ours, but for our brothers and sisters in the region.

AS : The military appears determined to hang on to power no matter what the cost. What will it take for the democratic uprising to win ? What role can regional solidarity such as the Milk-Tea Alliance play ? What can activists in the rest of the world do to help the struggle ?

MMK : The military will do anything to defend its rule. So, what would it take to win is the million dollar question. At this point, we need pressure on all fronts. No one, certainly not the U.N. or U.S., is coming to save us.

Whether we win or not depends, first and foremost, on the grassroots movement itself. In that struggle, the key thing will be to win over sections of the military and police to defect and join the revolution. That will make it impossible for the military to carry out the repression.

This is starting to happen. Already, some police have started to join the revolution. One of the commanders of the police has come over and revealed that there are a lot of other people in the military who want to join.

Why ? Because the military itself is a very hierarchical, oppressive, and dehumanizing institution. This is true of all militaries around the world, but because this military is practically fascist, it's even worse than normal militaries.

Many in the rank and file resent this. That opens up space to win them over. If we can do that, we have a real chance of breaking the military and winning the revolution.

Now, what is the role of regional solidarity ? If you look at the states in the Association of South-East Asian Nations, it's practically a dictator's club. So, any revolt in one of them puts all of them at risk.

If we can win, we can send a wave across the region. We can have a domino effect of revolutions from Thailand to Hong Kong and [beyond]. That points to the importance of the Milk Tea Alliance in building solidarity with struggles throughout Southeast Asia. We see the fight in Myanmar as not just ours, but for our brothers and sisters in the region.

The Milk Tea Alliance has united young activists throughout the region to organize this solidarity. It has used social media to raise awareness about what is happening in Myanmar, Thailand, Hong Kong, and other countries. We all recognize that we face common problems of democracy and equality.

So, mobilizing the Milk Tea Alliance for protests in support of each of our struggles is going to be very important. It can play a big role in pressuring all the outside powers, especially China, against supporting the military in Myanmar.

Finally, activists throughout the world have a big role to play in amplifying the voices of our movement, pressuring their governments to sanction the military, and organizing protests in solidarity with our struggle.

P.-S.

- Tempest Mag Posted March 22, 2021 : <https://www.tempestmag.org/2021/03/if-you-repress-us-we-will-rise-up-even-more>