

Campuses in Action: Myanmar's Academia Resisting against the Coup

Tuesday 13 July 2021, by [KHINE Nwet Kay](#) (Date first published: 2 July 2021).

“My decision was firm since I left my university in mid of February. My aunts are now giving me pressure to go back to my professor job. After seeing atrocities and mass killing of the junta, I no longer want to be part of the system they are ruling.”

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My friend was telling me through a voice call on an app with end-to-end encryption which is more secure than a normal telephone call that was assumed to be monitored by the state-run telecommunication company. Since the military junta staged the coup, we had to change our ways of living and thinking, while taking precautions is a must even for daily activities under military scrutiny. If our friends from the Western democracies ask, “how deep is your security concerns in everyday life in Myanmar?”, then I may answer, “It depends on who we are, what we are doing and whom we are associated with”. If someone is participating in a street protest or if distributing food and water to the protestors, she might face possible arrest and her house can be raided at night or even in broad daylight. Or if she bangs pots and pans to show her disapproval of the coup at eight o'clock every night, then the law enforcement bodies may come to her street and shout at her or in worse cases, they may use bullets and sound grenades to frighten all residents of the same neighborhood. She will be at an even greater risk if she is known as leading any resistance group by shouting slogans, taking the role of a citizen journalist or performing street music or reciting poems for revolution. All these actions can be framed as a crime under the laws of the dictators. And above all, what most enrages the coup leaders is the participation of government staff in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

Since the beginning of February, professionals across the spectrum of civil services have been playing a vital role in spearheading the labor strike known as CDM - or non-cooperation - with the new administration. The state- run newspapers and TV, a set of propaganda machines, belittled the motive of this countrywide resistance movement by calling it a “Country Destroying Movement”. Every day, all media platforms denounced the actions of civil servants and accused them of being irresponsible and unethical. However, that only prompted stronger resistance among some 200,000-government staff including teachers, medical doctors, engineers and other professionals from different government bodies. Although many went back to workplaces under financial and, most of the government departments are still paralyzed with shortage of human resources. The military leaders, whose strength is based only on oppression, did not achieve much more than likely sinking half of Myanmar's population into poverty by 2022, [according to the UN](#). The brutal crackdown on the resistance across the country has killed nearly 1000 people in four months, and over 4500 are now being detained in prison cells while 31 were sentenced to death.

Repression on academia: Depriving the rights to teach

My friend on the phone is a professor from a university based in Upper Myanmar. In both her student and career life in Myanmar, she has seen the consequences of five-decade long military rule in education sector. The qualifications of students were often found not competitive enough in exchange with other regional universities due to desperate lack of funding, training, and frequent shutdowns of the universities- once it lasted nearly four years after 1996 uprising. Understanding lack of freedom and autonomy under the rule of the military, she has been opposing the return of the dictator by participating in the CDM since February. She worried not for herself but for her family, especially elderly parents, when the government started to arrest the CDM staff. Although it is an inconvenient truth, she is ready to accept the fact that she might receive a prison term as long as three years if she is accused of inciting fellow civil servants. A few of her friends who have been active in the University Teachers' Union were already in the list of warrant under Penal code 505a, as many of CDM staff became one of the main targets of the State Administrative Council (SAC). [As of 11 June, 1936 persons were issued arrest warrants](#). People fleeing to the border areas with Thailand and India includes CDM staff, celebrities, journalists and others who faced the accusation by the junta under Penal Code 505 (A, B). Originally, Section 505(a) can criminalize CDM people with a charge for publishing or circulating any "statement, rumor or report" "with intent to cause, or which is likely to cause, any officer, soldier, sailor or airman, in the Army, Navy or Air Force to mutiny or otherwise disregard or fail in his duty." Two weeks after the coup, the junta made an additional provision to the section 505A so that it can lead to criminal liability for those who attempt to delegitimize the coup. The new section criminalizes any statement that "cause(s) fear," spreads "false news, [or] agitates directly or indirectly a criminal offense against a Government employee".

Despite overwhelming threat, more than 19,500 people from the higher education sector are participating in the CDM across the country. The number is greater in the basic education sector, as more than 125,000 schoolteachers joined the CDM [since February](#). After 4 months of resistance, the government released an order to remove [1] them from their positions starting from May 26. It means the basic education sector lost one third of its teaching staff and 160 universities across the countries lost many of their Heads of the departments, deputy heads of the department, professors, assistant professors and tutors. By the rules of centralized governance, all academic staff are employed by the state. Universities do not have autonomy in recruitment and employment termination policies. Due to their non-autonomous status, the respective universities are far from having a say in firing its own staff. Many non-CDM faculty members were also forced by higher authorities to punish their colleagues. Whether they like it or not, they are forced to play the role of a villain making arrangements for replacement of the dismissed personnel. Regardless of the tension that arose at the time of these removals, the CDM staff had to accept that they no longer hold entitlements as civil servants. The campus became an intense political ground as majority of the students also boycotted the classes and did not enroll in the new academic year starting from 25 May 2021. Regardless of the risk, these academics and students are still committed to be part of the movement believing that this sacrifice will make the country a better place.

It is a harsh punishment for the professors and staff from other ranks. It came as no surprise to them, but there are many living with financial difficulties looming. The higher their titles, the more likely that they can be a target of arrest, as the military aimed to set punishment to senior positions as an example. It is impossible that the government can arrest the whole group of CDM people and put them in prison, but the intention to cause fear had a significant impact. CDM staff who are taking care of elderly parents or raising little children have been afraid that the arrest would cause trauma for family members. In some cases, the family members were arrested or harassed if the police could not find the person they were looking for. "Such a huge popular resistance against the coup was not expected" claimed [Min Aung Hlaing, the coup leader, in an interview with Phoenix](#)

[news, a state-run media outlet from China.](#)

Similar to him, the two aunts of my friend also did not expect that their niece would take the risk of losing her career, which she has pursued for the last two decades. The elderly, who are now retired civil servants, have always believed that being a civil servant means not having a choice but to be loyal to the ruling government - whether it is legitimate or not. Still, my friend begged to differ from them. She and her colleagues rightfully challenged the conventional view that politics should be kept out of the workplace. Under the given circumstances, being neutral or non-partisan can be considered as being aligned with the coup leaders, who prefer silence to any voice of grievances. Many of the people who challenge the coup council are not even supporters of the National League for Democracy, which is now being accused of electoral fraud by the junta. [The whole resistance is triggered with a belief among the people that the illegitimate coup leaders will eventually sink the country into a full-blown dictatorship, and democratic values restored in the last ten years will disappear even before they are well consolidated.](#) Whether the people have their personal loyalty towards the NLD or not, the election result that came out as a product of a nascent democratic system is still fresh in the mind of the people [2]. After the 1990 election which also gave victory to the NLD, the coup leaders rejected the transfer of power to the NLD and extended military rule for another thirty years. The CDM and the whole resistance of 2021 carries the message that people do not want to allow the history to repeat itself. Especially the CDM participants believe that their resistance will be a big blow to the SAC and prevents the country from derailing its democratic transition. That is why my friend is firm with her decision and turns her deaf ear to the request of her aunts to lift the sanction against the military rule.

The junta's unjustifiable grip on political thoughts

Since the 1970s, the military backed government under Ne Win installed its ideological apparatus for civil servants by introducing political indoctrination in the "Central Institute of Civil Service", a training school for government staff. Pro-military lecturers teach "Political Thought", which remains a mandatory [course](#) in both of the branches in Yangon and Mandalay. Under these institutes, everyone entering civil services, including lecturers from the universities, must receive training at one point of their career. Until 2016, when this practice was finally stopped by the NLD government, everyone was even forced to wear a military uniform and do basic military training.

Lessons taught at these institutes are highly controversial, as they are propagating Buddhist-Burman supremacy in a multiethnic society while mainstreaming xenophobic mentality. Regardless of a 70 year long civil war with multi-religious and multi-ethnic forces within the country, these training institutes never stopped teaching political ideas that undermine political, religious and cultural rights of different ethnic groups, especially the marginalized Rohingya communities. [Successive military governments appointed professors who would not mind delivering biased curriculums in political economy, geopolitics or history which ideologically support the role of the military at the top of society.](#)

The democratic opening in 2011 brought an array of changes in government ministries as the reform demanded better governance and transparency. The media often used a newly granted freedom to question the role of civil servants in a new democratic society. Thus, civil servants themselves tended to complain that the teaching of politics at the military-controlled institutes is no longer convincing. It even arouses [confrontation between the professor and trainees as some lectures brought controversy about the country's history.](#) In comparison with the experience of her aunts, my friend's worldview became much wider already. Her PhD years abroad showed her what academic freedom means to society. She has been longing for more autonomy in the university rather than

being another voice submissive to the hierarchy, with the military at the top of society. Since the opening of the country in 2011, many of her senior and junior colleagues gained the opportunity to collaborate with international experts in research and teaching. They could participate in seminars and conferences overseas and upgrade their education by joining international Master and PhD programs. More scholarships became open to Myanmar tutors under different educational support schemes of donor governments. Moreover, the universities have more resources than ever under the NLD, as the Ministry of Education increased the research budget from [K1.4 billion \(0.84 million Euro\) in 2017-18 to K5.8 billion \(3.2 million Euro\) in 2019-2020 academic year](#).

Academic engagement with foreign universities was dramatically increased after many decades of isolation, and the number of Memorandum of Understanding signed with foreign universities reached to over 180 [3] in Yangon University alone. In post-colonial history of Myanmar, it was the first time for deepening the ties with foreign universities as sanction had previously forbidden outsiders to collaborate with Myanmar universities. Like in the old days under sanction policy, engagement with international academia decelerated again after the Rohingya crisis of 2017. Nevertheless, it did not kill enthusiasm of Myanmar academia, and many are trying to remain connected with international partners while building their own research capacities and pushing for a greater autonomy within the framework laid down by NLD government. In 2020, Myanmar was able to organize the Second Myanmar Universities' Research Conference via video conferencing amidst the covid-19 restrictions. In September 2020, the government declared [16 universities as autonomous](#) entities.

However, no one could foresee that these developments would be stalled or destroyed within the next four months due to the return of the dictators. The new policies of the SAC show disrespect for the rights of academia, even forcing scientists to resign. These recent changes led CDM staff to the conclusion that the return of the military means cancelling the achievements made in the education sector, while collaboration with international universities will be fading under authoritarian policies.

A safe environment in which an academic can speak and teach freely is nowhere guaranteed, but technology might help the teachers and students to create virtual platforms for learning. Only when democracy is restored, the CDM academics will be reinstated in their former positions. Only then, production and reproduction of knowledge in teaching and research will be free from harassing, threat and intimidation by law enforcement bodies. Under the dictatorship, no student can enjoy the right to critical thinking and thus resistance becomes a civic duty. And that is why my friend's parents gave their daughter a heartfelt congratulation for losing the job she loved most, although the future is still bleak.

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<https://www.ircac.org/2021/07/02/campuses-in-action-myanmars-academia-resisting-against-the-cou>

Footnotes

[1] Orders of Removal from the Ministry of Education dated from 26-31 May 2021.

[2] Under the 2008 Constitution, the army occupies 25 per cent of non-elected seats in parliament. In the election of 8 November 2020, a total of 91 political parties. The NLD won 80 per cent of the elected seats while the military backed party, Union Solidarity and Development Party suffered a crushing defeat. The USDP and the army later demanded a re-run of the election claiming widespread voting fraud notwithstanding the international observes stated otherwise.

[3] An interview on 6 May 2021 with a senior academic under anonymity from Yangon University.