

Is Civil Disobedience Myanmar's New Normal?



Myanmar Railway staff join the civil disobedience movement on Feb. 15 in Mandalay. / The Irrawaddy

By **MON MON MYAT** 15 February 2021

What is the new normal for Myanmar today? As people have been trying different forms of civil disobedience to fight the military coup it has become a new normal in Myanmar.

The words “civil disobedience” comes from State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi’s appeal before she was detained. She urged people to “oppose the military coup together in any way possible”. For her, as she often said, “the people are the most important force”.

A veteran journalist asked another National League for Democracy (NLD) leader, U Win Htein, about the message and what Daw Aung San Suu Kyi wants people to do. U Win

Htein said she wanted a civil disobedience movement rather than mass street protests because of COVID-19 and the potential for bloodshed.

As her message was not clear enough, people were puzzled about what to do.

NLD members have waited for instructions from the party's central executive committee who are being held in Naypyidaw.

The strict hierarchy of the NLD left people feeling bereft on the first day of the coup. My 78-year-old mother kept asking me, "Is there any luck?" She cried the whole day because her beloved leader, "Mother Suu", was detained. It is heartbreaking for her because she did not expect to return to military rule.

One day after the coup, people started banging pots and pans and honking car horns to oppose military rule. Banging pans is a traditional way of driving out ghosts. That initiative reached the international media and was dubbed the "drum revolution".

Thais have followed suit in an attempt to drive out Thailand's military regime.

But pots and pans are not enough for young citizens who have been hit the hardest by the forced internet shutdown ordered by the authorities. My son and his student friends have lost their online jobs, they cannot play virtual games and their online shopping businesses have folded.

Food Panda delivers lost their jobs as online ordering has broken down and most bank cards have stopped working because of connection failures. Shops only want cash as the banking system is unstable and the Grab taxi app just says, "no connection found". The internet shut down is causing a long list of problems.

Facebook was blocked after the authorities forced telecoms operators to ban the most popular social media network. People immediately searched for virtual private networks (VPNs) to bypass Myanmar's networks. Anti-coup posts and protest photos returned to Facebook.

Feb. 6: street protests

As the regime ignored anger for the first five days, young people lost patience. At 9am on Saturday, young activists organized the first street protests in Hledan near the Yangon University campus. They shouted "Boycott military coup", "Students are united", "We have a future" and "We don't want military rule" and sang revolutionary songs by the deceased student activist, Htoo Ein Thin. Others joined with three-finger salutes, clapping, shouting slogans and singing revolutionary songs. It touched me deeply as I

did the same during the 1988 student uprising. The “21 generation student uprising was born. I was now covering the protests as a journalist.

I saw a fellow journalist who I worked with during the 2007 saffron revolution and said I did not want to keep meeting him in this kind of situation.

We came because we know our cameras and words can help protect these brave young people but both protesters and journalists are in danger. Six police cars on Insein Road were a few meters from the protest. Fully armed riot police blocked the road with barricades. Soon the protest swelled to hundreds and a young woman handed red roses to police in a car. The officers at first did not dare to take the flowers until one in the front seat took them. People cheered, “pyithu ye” (our police).

The traffic police tried to address the congestion caused by barricades and protests on Insein Road. Drivers blocked Hledan junction, continuously honking in support of the protest. Soon the traffic police urged protesters to leave the road and riot police to remove the barricades. The protesters moved to a car park at the Hledan center on Pyay Road but Hledan junction remained crowded with hundreds of protesters until the late afternoon.

Feb. 7: mass demonstration

On day two the protests broadened with more than 100,000 people. In downtown Yangon on the Sunday afternoon, a sea of red shirts marched from Sule Pagoda Road to Bogoyoke Road. Cars followed and horns were sounded. Bystanders showed three-finger salutes. Demonstrators called for the release of detained leaders. I saw no police.

Feb. 8: demonstrations and civil disobedience

Early on Monday morning, Yangon’s streets became noisy with cars honking. Students in black gathered around Yangon University’s campus and they were ready to march for a third day. Placards read “Free Aung San Suu Kyi, free our leaders”, “Justice for Myanmar”, “Say „no” to military dictatorship”, “We want our elected government” and “Support the civil disobedience movement”.

At the Hledan Center, state high-school teachers and their pupils protested in white and green uniforms. A teacher told me: “We want to take part in this movement with the people.” The civil disobedience movement had started.

Banks were closed as staff were not coming to work. Doctors and nurses in uniform joined the demonstration. Nuns outside a church held up three fingers and held signs saying, “Reject dictatorship”. At City Hall near Sule Pagoda security was tight but tens

of thousands of protesters gathered in front of the police barricades. Young men's placards said, "Fuck military coup", "Dick head? We prefer the term Min Aung Hlaing" and "Our dreams are higher than MAH's height". They also often use MAL to refer to military chief Min Aung Hlaing. Yangon inspired other cities to mobilize. That evening, the regime imposed an 8pm to 4am curfew and limited gatherings to five.

Feb. 9: general strike

Civil disobedience means citizens refuse to recognize the military's orders with no recognition and no participation.

I saw staff from different universities protesting near the Hlaing campus.

Students marched from Hledan to the US Embassy and others gathered at the NLD headquarters before marching to Sule.

Police cars were parked near the eastern entrance of Yangon's Shwedagon Pagoda where the saffron revolution began in 2007. Sule Pagoda Road was crowded with protesters with little room for cars to pass.

Yangon Railway Station staff in blue and black uniforms joined the Sule protest. The country's main transport system broke down.

Health, education and transport sectors joined the movement and private banks have closed since Monday.

At around 11:30am, riot police blocked University Avenue Road to stop people joining the US Embassy protest. More than 200 riot police, about 50 soldiers and two white police cars with water cannon were in position at Hledan Junction.

Plastic sheets were handed out to protect protesters from the water jets. The situation was very tense under the blazing sun. Young activists ran messages to the police and were able to keep the serious situation calm. Similar scenes were happening in Mandalay, Magwe and Naypyidaw.

According to DVB, about 30 protesters and the DVB's correspondent were arrested in Mandalay. The reporter was soon released. Police fired on demonstrators in Naypyitaw at 1pm on Tuesday, leaving more than 20 injured and two in a critical condition. Riot police in Magwe used water cannon. Three police officers tried to protect demonstrators and later joined the protest. Political defiance rose with protests in more than 300 towns.

Feb. 10: general strike

The hospitals are empty, trains are not running, the banking system has broken down, post offices are closed and air traffic controllers stopped work. The central bank appealed to staff to return to work. The COVID-19 vaccination process stopped but no news about the general strike or civil disobedience movement appeared in the regime-controlled media.

Activists protested at the United Nations offices and the US, UK, Chinese, Indian and Japanese embassies to avoid confrontations with the riot police. The young people became more organized and disciplined.

The division of labor is impressive. They divide into frontline groups to lead the protests in targeted areas, leaflet deliverers, food and water suppliers and rubbish collectors. Others tweet to raise international awareness with hashtags like #HearTheVoiceMyanmar, #RejectTheMilitaryCoups, #WeNeedDemocracy, #CivilDisobedienceMovement, #RespectOurVotes and #SaveMyanmar. Some groups organize street performances and protests reach more than 500 towns.

Feb. 11: general strike

While demonstrations continue during the day, arrests are made at night. Key members of the Union Election Commission and NLD MPs are detained at military bases. The regime tries to generate fear using unlawful arrests and unjust orders but it cannot stop the movement. Street vendors, civil servants and MPs are all at high risk of arrest.

Opposition becomes more creative. Artists take over Pansodan Road in Yangon to raise funds to support striking civil servants. Poetry recitals are held and actor Paing Takhon organized a Chinese New Year feast in front of China's Embassy and street dancers perform across Yangon.

Feb. 12: general strike

On the seventh day of mass protests, I hear car horns and revolutionary songs in my neighborhood on Yangon's outskirts from 10am. People refuse to recognize the military regime.

They do not join the regime's attempts to mark Union Day and disobey unjust laws imposed by the military. They show no fear: it is becoming the new normal. I am keen to explore the city and see people's creativity.

The military's State Administrative Council has failed to keep banking, health care and transport operating so it cannot pretend to be ruling the country. All directives face constant disobedience. "No recognition, no participation" is a mantra for civil servants and more than 300 MPs try to maintain their legitimacy. There is a determination among people from all walks of life to end military rule. People say: "This is the end game. We must end military rule or the military will end our lives." They are determined to continue with civil disobedience until the dictatorship falls.

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