

The Long History of Myanmar's Civil Disobedience Movement

By **THE IRRAWADDY** 29 March 2021

It was just two days after the junta's Feb.1 coup that the civil disobedience movement (CDM) started in Myanmar. Refusing to work under military rule, doctors left their hospitals, railways staff stayed home and tellers avoided their counters.

People from all walks of life have since joined civil servants in a wider CDM by saying „no“ to products and services from military-owned businesses. They have boycotted products and services from military-owned businesses. They have boycotted the state lottery. They stopped putting advertisements and death notices in state-run newspapers. And they are withdrawing their savings from government and military-owned banks. All of this is being done to starve the military regime of income.

But the current CDM is not the first in Myanmar's history. Myanmar people also rose in revolt against oppressive British colonial rule in the 1920s by saying „no“.

They did not pay tax to the colonial government. They refused to obey its orders. They didn't bid for fishing, slaughterhouse and liquor licenses. They did not appear in court when they were prosecuted. And when they were forcibly taken to court they refused to answer the judge.

Buu (the Burmese word for „No“) associations mushroomed in towns across the country. The English phrase „non-cooperation“ became popular even among illiterate farmers in rural parts of the country.

Just as people today are boycotting the beer, cigarettes and telecom services owned by the military, people in the 1920s boycotted imported products or burned them in protest at colonial rule. They also stopped having western hairstyles.

Buu associations first emerged in Hinthada in Ayeyarwady Region, before spreading to Shwebo and Monywa in central Myanmar and Dawei in southern Myanmar. The nationalist Buddhist monk U Ottama, the first person to be imprisoned in colonial Myanmar for political activities against British rule, travelled through southern Myanmar urging the people not to pay the colonists taxes.

The colonial government declared Buu associations to be unlawful associations and used force to disband them. But it took the British four years to quash the resistance movement and they had to impose martial law.

“I have seen those who refused to pay taxes arrested en masse and subjected to various forms of tortures such as shackling them under the sun. I have seen mass arrests of leaders who were handcuffed and

driven as if they were cattle,” wrote Dawei native U Ba Swe, who would later become the second prime minister of Myanmar in 1956.

Today, civil servants refusing to work under the military regime are also facing repression. The regime has threatened striking government employees with suspensions, dismissals and eviction from staff quarters, but the civil servants are continuing their strike. This is having a serious impact on the regime’s administrative abilities.

The Myanmar people of today are showing greater commitment than their predecessors in the 1920s. They are refusing to sell food to police and soldiers, an unprecedented event in Myanmar.