

Myanmar's lost generation: nation's youth sacrificing futures for freedom



A child playing near shoes displayed with flowers in Yangon as part of the 'Marching Shoes Strike' to protest against the demonstration against the military coup in Myanmar Photograph: ANONYMOUS/AFP/Getty Images

Dreams of careers and family life have been replaced with death and injury in the wake of the 1 February coup

For Myanmar's young people, 2021 was supposed to be a year for

optimism. After seeing through the Covid-19 pandemic, the rollout of the vaccine had begun and general elections in November had marked a step towards the country realising its potential.

But in the wake of the **1 February coup**, their dreams have turned into nightmares, as many of Myanmar's young people have found themselves forced to sacrifice their futures to take a stand against the military.

Aspiring engineer, Hlyan Phyo Aung, 22, is one of them. News portal Myanmar Now reported that he was hurt by an explosion during a crackdown on a protest in the central city of Magway on 27 March. A soldier reportedly shot off his injured hand at close range, another shot multiple rubber bullets into his other hand, and then troops kicked him in the face until onlookers flung themselves over him, saving his life.

His right hand was amputated at the wrist; he may also permanently lose the use of his left hand. His left leg was shot eight times and may also be amputated, his right thigh has two bullet wounds, his face was battered and damage to his eyesight caused by the impact of the gunshots may also be irreparable. The military has stopped him from receiving treatment outside one of its own hospitals, and is also charging him with incitement, which carries up to three years in jail.

His story echoes the brutality borne by other protesters of his generation. Among the first civilian casualties was a 19-year-old girl shot in the head by security forces. Then came an endless list of ruined futures – a 24-year-old father who lost his leg after being shot in Yangon on 10 March, in the north-west region of Sagaing, a 20-year-old man whose leg was also amputated after the military reportedly threw a hand grenade, a 19-year-old student shot dead near Yangon on 27 March, and even younger casualties on the same day, such as a 14-year-old girl who died in her home after security forces sprayed bullets in a neighbourhood, and a seven-year-old girl shot while sitting on her father's lap in Mandalay.

Some of those who survived the attacks have been maimed for life or are unable to work as a result of their injuries.

‘I wanted a happy life’

“I wrote content, worked hard and spent a lot of time with friends,” says Wai, 21, an online culture writer. “My future was clear: I wanted a good job, a happy family and a peaceful life.”

But since the military seized power, Wai's main goal has been to avoid the junta's forces, who have killed and maimed hundreds of his peers. Now unemployed because of the economic crisis triggered in the coup's aftermath, he fears junta troops will hunt him down.

A 2014 consensus showed that more than 50% of Myanmar's population was under the age of 30. This segment has direct knowledge of the military's disastrous rule that over decades impoverished a once-prosperous nation, but also a decade of exposure to the outside world as well as better access to information, education and job opportunities. Faced once more with a military dictatorship, their role in the anti-coup movement is testament to the sacrifices they are willing to make for hard-earned rights.



Children play with toy guns next to a banner put up by activists in protest against the military coup in Yangon Photograph: AFP/Getty Image

“If the junta beats this revolution, our future is gone,” says Wai, who saw a fellow protester shot dead in North Okkalapa, a township in Myanmar’s biggest city Yangon, on 8 March – a week before martial law was declared in the area.

“If they win, I won’t marry or have children because I wouldn’t want my family to live under their control. International relations would be ruined, and life would become like North Korea. We’ll protest as much as we can until we win. It is worth giving your life for the next generation.”

The regime’s forces have killed at least 714 people since the coup, according to the Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), but hundreds more are likely to have been seriously wounded by live rounds, mortar fire, hand grenades and other weapons used by the military.

The country risks spiralling into “full-blown conflict,” according to UN high commissioner for human rights, Michelle Bachelet, who on Tuesday urged countries to push the military into halting its violent repression against citizens.

Following the latest massacre of at least 82 civilians in **Bago**, she said the world “must not allow the deadly mistakes of the past in Syria and elsewhere to be repeated.” Atrocities have become increasingly difficult to record because of the regime’s shutdown of mobile data and wireless broadband that has blocked internet access for most of the population. Meanwhile, analysts have warned of a dramatic reversal in the economic progress Myanmar gained over the past decade. The World Bank has projected the

economy to shrink 10% in 2021, but Fitch Solutions has forecast a 20% decline in growth for the 2020-21 fiscal year and impending “economic collapse”.

While some protesters have begun to use makeshift weapons against security forces, hundreds of others are reportedly travelling to territory controlled by ethnic armed groups where they are receiving training in basic warfare. Clashes are intensifying between the ethnic groups and the Tatmadaw, which has deployed deadly airstrikes near Myanmar’s borders with China and Thailand. Recent reports indicate that the military has also sentenced to death 23 people following secret trials, including four protesters.



A woman in tears makes the three finger salute while holding a portrait of her relative shot dead a day earlier by security forces Photograph: Aung Kyaw Htet/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Ruined futures

Another victim of military brutality was Thet Paing Soe, 30, who was supporting his mother with his salary as a driver.

On 20 March, Thet Paing Soe was shot while hiding from security forces down an alley in Yangon’s Tamwe township. His family rushed the funeral because they feared soldiers would seize the body.

The second youngest of six siblings and not yet married, his loss “could not be put into words,” said the brother. “I am still suffering,” he says. “If it were possible, I would fight back, but [without weapons] we are still unable to do that.”

After glimpsing life under a government chosen by the people, Min Thura, 23, felt he had no choice but to demonstrate against a return to military rule.

Before the coup, he applied for a warehouse job in Yangon and on 4 March came the good news: his interview was successful. But it was too late by then. Security forces had shot him in the left eye with a rubber bullet the previous day, causing damage to his right eye as well. Forced to decline the role and go into the care of his family, he said his doctor doubts he will recover his eyesight.

“I have to accept that I will no longer be able to see,” he says.

As plans come together for a federal army to face the Tatmadaw, Min Thura said young people should join the resistance.

“I don’t want our citizens to get hurt or die any more because we’re all brothers and sisters,” he said, adding that if the international community is planning to help: “please help us as quickly as possible.”