‘Revolution dwells in the heart’: Myanmar’s poets cut down by the military

Khet Thi, who captured the unflinching determination of the Myanmar public, was the third poet to be killed by the military since the coup

Myanmar demonstrators shout slogans as they march on a street during an anti-military coup protest in Mandalay, Myanmar. Photograph: EPA

His words captured the unflinching determination of the Myanmar public in the face of military brutality: “They shoot in the head, but they don‘t know revolution dwells in the heart.”
The poet Khet Thi was taken from his home in Shwebo, in the Sagaing region, last Saturday. The next day, his wife collected his body from a hospital. His organs had been removed, she told BBC Burmese.

Myanmar poet Khet Thi. Photograph: Irrawaddy News

The military has tried to crush any form of dissent over recent months, including writers or celebrities whose words have the power to inspire hope and rebellion.

“Poetry, charisma and courage are a deadly blend against any tyranny,” said Ko Ko Thett, a poet, translator and anthologist of contemporary Burmese poetry, who is based in the UK.

At least 32 writers and poets are in detention, according to PEN International, a global association of writers which has been tracking arrests. Others have fallen victim to military violence on the frontlines of rallies. Two poets – K Za Win and Myint Myint Zin – were shot dead when the military opened fire on protesters in March

On Friday, U Sein Win, a poet, politician and philanthropist, was doused in petrol and burned to death in an attack by an unknown perpetrator. He is the fourth poet to be killed in recent months.

Myanmar soldiers walk along a street during a protest against the military coup in Yangon. Photograph: Reuters

Myanmar‟s rich poetic heritage is deeply intertwined with politics. Poets used verse to resist British colonial rule, as well as the previous military regime, which censored and imprisoned writers. Poets would meet in tea shops to discuss their works, and use coded language to bypass censorship.

When Aung San Suu Kyi‟s National League for Democracy was elected to power in 2015‟s historic election – a breakthrough for democracy after decades of direct military rule – 11 poets were among the candidates who won seats.

Though there were still limitations on expression under Aung San Suu Kyi‟s government, poets were able to write and publish far more freely.

Khet Thi quit his job as an engineer in 2012 to pursue poetry, selling cakes and ice-creams on the side to support himself. He grew up in Pale township in Monywa, where his parents operated a peanut oil press, and first began writing poetry while at school.

Protesters with placards showing the image of detained Myanmar civilian leader Aung San Suu Kyi sit along a street before holding a candlelight vigil during a demonstration against the military coup in Yangon Photograph: AFP/Getty Images

“His poems have always been special and unique because they came from his heart,” said a close friend. They had not been able to meet since the coup, and had avoided discussing the political situation on the phone, in case they were being monitored. Many poets were in hiding, fearing arrest, he said.

“Khet Thi‟s virtue was that he only wanted to be friends with people who see people as people [who do not discriminate]. He was a revolutionary with strong beliefs and someone who never steps back,” the friend added.

Khet Thi was possibly the only prominent poet from Myanmar‟s Bamar majority who wrote about the 2017 Gu Dar Pyin massacre, said Ko Ko Thett. Discussion of such attacks, where hundreds of Rohingya were killed by security forces and buried in mass graves, was highly sensitive.

Before the coup, he would sell printed copies of his books, but over recent months his words were shared mainly on Facebook. He addressed rallies, telling crowds at a march on 27 March that every protester in Myanmar was a Nobel peace prize winner. “Who does the power belong to?” he shouted into a microphone. “The people!” protesters replied.

Though critical of the NLD, K Za Win also appeared at the front line of protests that swept the country in the wake of the coup, defending the party‟s election victory and right to govern. He grew up in Letpadaung near Monywa, and spoke out about land rights after his family lost their land to a mining project pursued jointly by a Chinese and Myanmar military-backed company.

K Za Win was a Buddhist monk but left the sangha, said Ko Ko Thett, because he believed there was little point in being recognised as a learned monk by the military state.

He spent more than one year in prison after he was arrested for taking part in a rally for education reform in 2015. After his release, he published his most famous work, a collection called My Reply to Ramon.

Prior to his death, K Za Win had written on Facebook: “Though I have different views than you, I‘ll lay down my life for you all.” Myint Myint Zin and K Za Wi were among 38 people killed during crackdowns on protesters on 3 March.

The poets expressed the emotions that were felt by the people, said May, a professor in Japan. “This revolution is led by all of our sheer will power and we need literary people who speak for us.”

The Burmese language already has a poetic quality, said Ko Ko Thett. “It features euphonies and rhymes frequently. Most Burmese slogans, by the regime or anti-regime groups, are couplets.”

But the verses written by Khet Thi and others are far more than a literary exercise. Security forces have killed 790 people since the coup, according to an advocacy group, including protesters, bystanders and dozens of children. Thousands have been arrested, and are often held in unknown locations. Reports of torture of widespread.
“For many people on the ground in Myanmar, lines such as „with what grief I will grieve for you, my martyred son“ by [the poet] A Phaw Khaing have become daily reality. People who are at a loss for words tend to find answers in poetry,” he said.

Many will remember Khet Thi by one of his famous lines, written in response to military violence: “You try so hard to bury us underground, because you don‘t know that we are the seeds.”