

# Women on the Front Lines in Myanmar's Fight for Democracy

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Since Myanmar's newly established State Administration Council, led by the commander in chief, Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, staged a coup on 1 February 2021, the country has descended into violent chaos. When millions of protesters peacefully took to the street demanding to restore the democratically elected government, they were met with the military's signature brutal crackdown. The very first fatality of the military's ruthless suppression was a 19-year-old woman named Mya Thwet Khine. A sniper fatally shot her in the head while she participated in a rally near Nay Pyi Taw, the country's capital city.<sup>1</sup> Since her death, many more female protesters have been killed, arrested, and assaulted by the military as they demonstrated against the coup. The military raided homes in the middle of the night, dragged the women off to jail, and locked them up without due process. Once in captivity, many of them were subjected to tortured interrogations and sexual assaults.<sup>2</sup> "Despite the risks, women have stood at the forefront of Myanmar's protest movement, sending a powerful rebuke to the generals who ousted a female civilian leader and reimposed a patriarchal order that has suppressed women for a half a century."<sup>3</sup> According to one of the protesters, "as a mum, in the deep down of my heart, I realized that the future of my daughter, and the future of all young people in the country will be drawn back to dark." Women know that they have more to lose. Therefore, about 60 percent of protesters are women, according to the Women's League of Burma.<sup>4</sup> The mass number of women in the front line of this political uprising defies their stereotypical role.

## Traditional Role of Women in Myanmar Society

While Myanmar women traditionally enjoyed considerable agency and rights, their roles were constricted over time. Following the 1962 coup, successive military regimes used isolationist policies to control and subjugate the population by cutting off the country from the rest of the world. The regimes aimed to keep out the "undesirable foreign influences."<sup>5</sup> The military regimes were largely successful in keeping the people ignorant by deliberately dismantling the public education and health systems. They controlled the population by clamping down on civil society and using state-sanctioned violence against those who oppose the regime.

All these tactics had particularly detrimental effects on women's rights and roles over the years. For example, the military regime promoted nationalism by amending the interfaith marriage law to the detriment of the women. The new law stripped women who marry non-Buddhist or non-Burmese men of their property rights. Also, the military regime prohibited women's networking alliances. The regime allowed only organizations that will purportedly preserve Myanmar culture, which means strengthening the traditional gender roles and bolstering males' privileged position within the society.<sup>6</sup>

Although the women actively participated in the anticolonial struggle for independence from the United Kingdom in the 1930s, they were still subordinated under the men. Due to engrained beliefs about appropriate gender roles, it was difficult for women to achieve the same levels of authority and influence as men.<sup>7</sup> After the independence from the British, now under Myanmar military rule, women were further relegated to the sidelines since the Myanmar military is an extremely chauvinistic organization. The military's top-down structure and culture reinforced the concept of male superiority and discouraged women from participating in political activities. As such, women were perpetually underrepresented in the leadership positions of the government bureaucracy. Authorities disproportionately targeted and punished women who dared to oppose or challenge the status quo.<sup>8</sup> It was not surprising that the military sniper chose to shoot a young woman as the first victim in this current uprising. According to the state-run MRTV, the military snipers were ordered to purposefully shoot the protesters in the head to create a sense of horror for the onlookers.<sup>9</sup> Instead of being frightened, more women came out to protest against the military regime after 1 February.

### **Changing Role of Women in Myanmar Society**

Beginning around 2011, the country's opening and the process of transition to democracy opened the eyes of Myanmar women. They were exposed to new ideas about gender equality, feminism, and human rights as the world reengaged the country. Most of the international aid packages had women's empowerment and capacity-building components. Women had opportunities to question and challenge the prevailing cultural beliefs, practices, and power structures that kept women in subordinate positions.<sup>10</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, Women's Peace and Security, offered additional capacities and capabilities for the Myanmar women to take part in the nontraditional peace and security sectors. As Daw Aung San Suu Kyi led the National League for Democracy to power, the women's traditional understanding of leadership—such as deeply held beliefs that leadership belongs to men—was dispelled. In addition to her charisma

and popularity, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi's gender has been one of the key factors that endangered the existing misogynistic power structure. The process of democratization of the country's political system allowed women's voices and perspectives to enter the political arena. They are now refusing to go back. Daw Zin Mar Aung,<sup>11</sup> minister of foreign affairs of Myanmar's National Unity Government, said "this battle is the last battle for us and for the country" during her interview with ABC Australia on 29 July 2021.<sup>12</sup>

### **Women Formed the Backbone of the Revolution**

Women are taking this current political crisis as an opportunity to reshape the narrative of women's role in society in addition to opposing the military takeover. They have become the backbone of the revolution. Women's labor unions, garment workers, health care providers, and teachers were the first to protest. "Women activists and politicians have also helped mobilize crowds to join the protests. Daw Ei Thinzar Maung, one of the country's youngest candidates for MP in the last election, nominated by the Democratic Party for a New Society, has been using her social media accounts where she has more than 360,000 followers to rally support for the demonstrations."<sup>13</sup> The most influential critic of the regime, Daw Ei Pencilo, with 1.6 million followers, is on the regime's most-wanted list for her ability to lead public opinion against the military.<sup>14</sup> The women have been able to improve their capacity for social mobilization and networking.<sup>15</sup> There is also unprecedented cooperation between different ethnic women's groups in response to the coup. They have been able to leverage social media platforms such as Facebook to socialize their ideas and mobilize the people for action. Myanmar women are feeling empowered to lead the rebellion this time around. They now have the capacity and capabilities to lead the effort. One of the women passionately said with conviction that "we as the future mothers of the country, we have the responsibility to lead the restoration of democracy."<sup>16</sup> They are now associating motherhood with leadership. Again, this is a departure from the traditional mindset of leadership being a masculine domain. The local NGO Gender Equality Network estimated that 70–80 percent of movement's leaders are women.<sup>17</sup> According to Daw Khin Ohmar, an 88-Generation<sup>18</sup> political activist: "In 1988, the leaders were men. This time, they're women. It's exciting."<sup>19</sup>

### **Innovative Methods of Protests**

The women are utilizing feminine qualities and newly acquired capabilities gained since the opening to counter the military junta. The capabilities are bringing innovative tactics to the fight. Women protesters hoisted traditional women's

sarongs and undergarments over the streets to stop the advancing troops. They are creatively utilizing the deep-rooted belief that men's masculine superiority, *hpone*, will vanish if the women's sarongs and undergarments soar directly above the men's heads. This tactic stopped the advancing armed troops in their tracks. They did not dare to cross the clotheslines, and the women were able to save lives that day. Since then, the regime has made such tactics illegal and brutally raided homes of the women who had engineered them. Still, women continue with their resistance. They also led the nightly campaign of banging pots and pans, the traditional way to ward off evil, to clearly send a message to the regime of their dissent.<sup>20</sup> Now, it is illegal to do so and again, the security forces raided homes for such activities and arrested the residents, of which many were women. The youngest victim so far has been a seven-year-old girl, Khin Myo Chit, who was shot during a home raid in Mandalay.<sup>21</sup>

The women also played a leading role in organizing and sustaining the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), which has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize. The CDM was primarily responsible for preventing the military regime to consolidate its control of the population and country so far. The CDM delivered a crippling blow to the military regime as majority of civil servants joined the strike. Nearly 20,000 university faculty and administrators joined the CDM, and at least three-quarters of the university faculty is female. More than a quarter of teachers in basic education joined the CDM. Again, nearly 90 percent of the teachers are women. Despite constant fear of arrest and financial loss, the participants of CDM remained committed to the strike. They refuse to return to work until democracy is restored in Myanmar.

## **Myanmar Democracy in the Context of Strategic Competition and China**

According to the 2021 Freedom House report, 75 percent of the population around the world experienced 15 years of consecutive decline of freedom and continuous recession of democracy.<sup>22</sup> Myanmar, situated on the doorstep of China in mainland Southeast Asia, now joins the ranks of those who are in the front line in the fight for democracy. This puts Myanmar square in the middle of the major powers competition and the contest between democratic systems and authoritarian regimes. China does not wish to see Myanmar be a democratic country. Safeguarding and controlling the Myanmar corridor was of vital importance to Beijing's foreign policy. Myanmar provides a strategic alternative to China's "Malacca Dilemma." China's dependency on the narrow Strait of Malacca, where a majority of its shipping and energy supplies must traverse through, created a significant

vulnerability in its strategic competition with the United States. Beijing sees unfettered access to the Myanmar corridor as a key to remedy this strategic vulnerability. Furthermore, having access to over 2,000 kilometers of Myanmar coastline (strategically located at the western entrance to the Malacca Strait) with direct access to the Indian Ocean would give China an enormous commercial advantage over its major competitors. If this comes to fruition, China will be able to control both the eastern part of Malacca Strait via the artificial islands in the South China Sea and the western part via Myanmar.

Additionally, China has viewed Myanmar as a land bridge to the Indian Ocean. This recognition and ambition date back to the early Chinese explorers who searched for a route from the landlocked provinces of China (such as the modern-day Yunan area) via Myanmar to the sea. Therefore, it has always been a great concern for China to limit Western influence in Myanmar. Flourishing democracy in Myanmar is not in the best interest of China. Since the coup, China has refused to condemn the military junta and vetoed many of the resolutions against the junta at the United Nations.<sup>23</sup> There has been allegation of China's assistance with establishing Cyber Firewall to restrict and track the protesters' online activities.<sup>24</sup>

### **Russia's Assistance to the Military Junta**

Amid the coup, Russia strengthened its ties with the military regime. Russia's deputy defense minister attended the Armed Forces Day celebration on 27 March 2021, the same day the junta's security forces killed nearly 100 unarmed protesters, including children, in 40 towns and cities throughout Myanmar.<sup>25</sup> In June, Russian defense minister Sergei Shoigu hosted General Min Aung Hlaing's visit to Moscow with pomp and circumstance. The defense minister affirmed Russia's continuing support to Myanmar military with training and arms sales. Myanmar has been one of the traditional export markets for Russian weapons. Russia sees the rising instability within Myanmar as a lucrative opportunity to increase its sales of weapons.<sup>26</sup> Myanmar military has purchased \$807 million in Russian weapons since 2011. Recently, Russia is set to deliver six Su-30 fighter jets and has agreed to supply the Pantsir-S1 surface-to-air missile system, Orlan-10E surveillance drones, and radar equipment.<sup>27</sup> Myanmar's military has been increasingly relying on airstrikes in the border areas to crack down on ethnic armed groups, which are also assisting and training protesters and Peoples Defense Forces<sup>28</sup>. The indiscriminate nature of the airstrikes has killed many unarmed villagers, including children, and displaced hundreds of thousands of civilians.<sup>29</sup> Such conditions are likely to intensify as the military obtains new and advanced airpower with the help from Russia.

## **COVID-19 Surge Exacerbates Political Crisis**

To make things worse, COVID-19 infection is spreading rapidly in Myanmar. The UN special rapporteur for Myanmar has warned that the country is at risk of becoming a “super spreader” COVID state for the region.<sup>30</sup> On 30 July 2021, “the United Kingdom has warned the United Nations Security Council that half of coup-wracked Myanmar’s population of 54 million could become infected with COVID-19 within the next two weeks.”<sup>31</sup> In the midst of COVID spread, the security forces have been targeting the health care workers and physicians who participated in the CDM. According to the United Nations, the security forces had conducted 260 attacks against health care workers, killed 18, and detained 157 so far.<sup>32</sup> Many of them were shot in the head. Myanmar is now considered one of the most dangerous places on earth for health care workers.<sup>33</sup> Again, most Myanmar health care workers are women. The head of the country’s vaccination program, Dr. Htar Htar Lin, was arrested and charged with high treason in June 2021.<sup>34</sup> Many women health care workers and physicians are working in underground clinics to provide health care to the desperate population. These underground health care clinics are constantly in threat of raids.

## **Women at the Front Line of the Fight for Democracy**

As the country continues to descend into deeper turmoil with assistance from China, Russia, and COVID-19, women are holding the front line with nothing but their courage, commitment, and creativity. Intervention or substantive support from the United Nations, ASEAN, the United States, or the European Union is unlikely.

It is now up to women leaders such as Daw Zin Mar Aung, Daw Ei Thinzar Mung, Daw Thinzar Shunlei Yi and Daw Ester Ze Naw; women lawyers Daw Zar Li, Daw May Zin Oo, Daw Myint Myat, Daw Khin Hlaing, Daw Khin Myo;<sup>35</sup> women journalists Daw Naw Betty Han and Daw Nyein Lay; women organizers Daw Tin Wei and Daw Moe Sandar Myint—working day and night risking arrests and their lives—to ensure that the fight continues against the brutal military regime. The National Unity Government, made up of ousted lawmakers in hiding, has also appointed several women ministers.<sup>36</sup>

As the battle for democracy in Myanmar rages on at the doorstep of China, Myanmar’s women will continue to stand on the front lines to prevent the triumph of authoritarianism. It is a tall order for them to reach a tipping point against the heavily armed military—which enjoys the support from authoritarian regimes such as China and Russia—without some substantive international assistance beyond encouragements and statements. The battle for democracy in

Myanmar has become a symbolic contest between democracy and authoritarianism at the heart of the Indo-Pacific region. It will be in the best interest of the most prominent exemplars of democracy to assist Myanmar's women achieve the tipping point to defeat the military regime. The failure to restore democracy in Myanmar will have reverberations throughout the Indo-Pacific. "The international community must recognize the courage of the women of Myanmar and stand with them in their fight for democracy."<sup>37</sup> 🌟

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Dr. Byrd received a BA in economics and accounting from Claremont McKenna College and holds an MBA with emphasis in Asia-Pacific economics and business from the University of Hawaii. She earned her doctorate in education leadership from the University of Southern California. She retired from the US Army after 28 years of distinguished service. Highlights of her military career include serving as the deputy economic advisor, civil-military operations plans officer, and interagency operations officer at US Pacific Command in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. She also served as a linguist and cultural advisor to the US delegations attending the Association of Southeast Asian Nations Regional Forum, POW/MIA recovery negotiations in Myanmar (Burma), and Operation Caring Response to Cyclone Nargis, and US-Myanmar (Burma) Human Rights Dialogues. Dr. Byrd joined the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in 2007. She researches, teaches, and publishes in the areas of US-Myanmar (Burma) relations; security dynamics in Southeast Asia; economics and security linkages; rising inequality and its implication on security; the roles of private-sector, women, and education in socioeconomic development; civil-military operations; leadership; organizational development & innovation; women peace & security; and transnational learning and adult education.

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