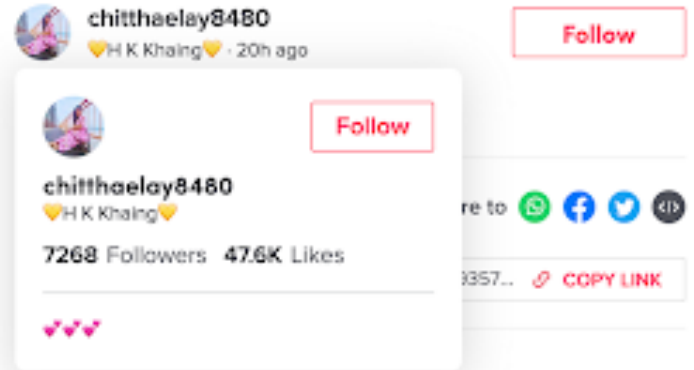




A TikTok video claims that someone standing behind Ma Kyal Sin at a Mandalay protest on March 3 was coordinating with third-party snipers to have her killed

Disinformation campaign tries – and fails – to shift blame for protester deaths

MARCH 7, 2021



As condemnation grows over the Tatmadaw's killing of peaceful protesters, state media and pro-military social media accounts are alleging that third parties are responsible.

By FRONTIER

As Myanmar's military faces near-global condemnation for its killing dozens of unarmed protesters, including teenagers, it has turned to a familiar tactic: disinformation.

In recent days, pro-military social media accounts and state news outlets have claimed that security forces are not killing protesters – rather, that some third party is responsible. Social media posts proliferated on Thursday, the day before the junta published similar claims in state-run newspapers including the English-language *Global New Light of Myanmar* and Burmese-language *Myanmar Alin*, as well as military-owned *Myawaddy*.

The junta published two articles on Friday in *Global New Light of Myanmar* in its attempt to shift responsibility for the deaths. One said the deaths “are not associated with the security forces, and there might be some unscrupulous persons behind these cases”. Another specifically disavowed responsibility for the death of 19-year-old Ma Kyal Sin, who eyewitnesses said was shot in the head by security forces during a protest in Mandalay on Wednesday.

The article said the junta was “investigating the cause of her death” but also exonerated security forces, citing unnamed “experts”. “Experts have analysed that it was not an injury caused by a riot

weapon and if it is the injury caused by the riot weapon or live ammunition, it is not possible for the head of the deceased person to be in good condition,” the article said.

The supposedly ongoing nature of the investigation into Kyal Sin’s death seems to have been used as justification for security forces to break into a cemetery and **exhume** her body on Friday afternoon, just a day after her funeral.

On Thursday, hundreds of Facebook and Tiktok accounts shared the same message claiming protesters were being killed by somebody other than the military and police. One of the earliest **examples** Frontier could locate was a Facebook post shared at 5:34am that day, during the nightly internet blackout.

From 1am to 9am every night since February 14, the Ministry of Transport and Communications has **forced gateway companies** to restrict internet access. However, it is not cut entirely – **network data** from monitoring group NetBlocks shows connectivity inside the country tends to hover at around 20 percent of the norm.

The March 4 Facebook post claimed that bullets found in victims’ bodies did not match those used by the military and were instead from the All Burma Students’ Democratic Front, an armed group formed by student protesters who fled to the Thai-Myanmar border after the military crushed a popular uprising in 1988. The ABSDF, which signed the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement in 2015, is estimated to have at most just a few hundred soldiers.

“Police and soldiers haven’t used live rounds yet, they are only using rubber bullets,” the post claims, despite widespread evidence to the contrary. Soldiers have even **openly threatened** to kill protesters with live rounds in videos that spread on TikTok.

A doctor in Mandalay previously **said** she had treated protesters injured by live rounds fired by security forces.

Hundreds of users followed the post’s advice to copy and paste the message – a tactic to bypass content removals by social media platforms. These users included one with nearly 20,000 followers, while thousands of other accounts simply reshared the post.



The grave of 19-year-old Mandalay protester Ma Kyal Sin, whose body has since been exhumed in a raid by security forces. (Frontier)

A similar Facebook post from March 3 made other dubious claims, saying “international pressure has been less than expected” and that there has been “no public participation’ in the protests.

These statements fly in the face of reality. International pressure is steadily mounting against the junta, with most countries studiously avoiding any action that would constitute recognition of the

regime. Inside the country, millions have joined street protests over the past month.

The March 3 post argues that both Ma Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing – the first protester known to die at the hands of security forces, in Nay Pyi Taw – and Kyal Sin were both killed by unnamed third parties. Not only is there no evidence to support this, there is much evidence to suggest security forces were responsible.

The post is thinly sourced. It claims “Mandalay-based journalists” verified that a “third group” killed Mya Thwe Thwe Khaing, but no such reporting can be found. The Tatmadaw said police used only rubber bullets to fire on protesters that day in Nay Pyi Taw, despite doctors confirming she was killed by a live round and a video clip showing the moment she was shot, not far from where a line of police were spraying protesters with water cannon.

The March 3 post is attributed to “Radio Free Myanmar”, a [known disinformation network](#) that frequently spreads anti-NLD as well as anti-Muslim content.

Other posts pushed the narrative that Kyal Sin was killed by another protester in the crowd, claiming a small pen gun that can fire one bullet at a time was used. This [post](#), with over 10,000 shares and 5,700 reactions, purports to show the pen gun and ammunition for it, but there is no evidence linking the weapon to Kyal Sin’s death.

An account called Nay Zin Latt has been credited by many other Facebook users as the original poster of a picture of a single-shot pen gun. Nay Zin Latt’s [original post](#) was shared over 2,000 times and copied and pasted by many other users. One of these copy-paste posts was eventually also shared by Daw Than Than Aye, an account with over 43,000 followers that claims to be a legal advisor for the pro-military Union Solidarity and Development Party. *Frontier* could not confirm her identity.

An account called Aung San Kyaw, whose cover photos features Min Aung Hlaing, also [posted](#) soon after 10pm on March 4, targeting Muslim NLD lawmaker U Sithu Maung. The post claimed a picture of a man with a gun was Sithu Maung and that he had received explosives training from the ABSDF.

Meanwhile, on TikTok, a video claimed that a protester standing behind Kyal Sin was coordinating with third-party snipers in order to have her killed. The clip had over 44,000 reactions before it went private.

Ko Bo Kyi, joint secretary of the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, said his organisation had seen no evidence that any party other than the security forces were responsible for deaths of civilian protesters. He has, however, seen credible evidence of military snipers at protests.

It’s worth pointing out that far more content has spread on Facebook and TikTok memorialising Kyal Sin and explicitly condemning security forces for killing her. This [post](#), by Burmese-American mixed martial artists Aung La Nsang, has over 14,000 shares and over 87,000 reactions, far more than any of the disinformation posts viewed by *Frontier*.

“It wasn’t a stray bullet that killed her but a precise head shot,” he wrote, blaming a “military sniper”.

Bo Kyi said the disinformation has likely been ineffective in convincing the general population. “[The] military always lies,” he said, “and people do not believe it.”

He condemned the reported removal of Kyal Sin’s body, and said that even if the military does undertake an investigation into her death, it won’t be reliable.

“If the military did forcibly exhume Kyal Sin’s body without permission, it is a crime,” he said. “

“We need an independent investigation for alleged human rights violations committed by military police and soldiers all across Myanmar,” he said.

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