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Meet Myanmar's Blue Shirts

A new free speech movement clashes with Myanmar's military.

By **Lorcan Lovett**

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Activists shout slogans during a movement titled "Right to Information," in hopes to free two Reuters journalists jailed in connection with their reporting about massacres against Rohingya Muslims, Sept. 16, 2018, in front of city hall in Yangon, Myanmar.

Credit: AP Photo/Thein Zaw

The moment Kay Khine Tun, 22, was arrested at her nursing job in Yangon Children's Hospital, her father readied for an exhausting

battle with his former employer, the Myanmar Army.

“The military has no shame at all,” said Sein Mya, a 53-year-old taxi driver, as he spooned half a dozen sugars into his coffee. “They are showing off their power and authority. They believe that frightening people may lead to success in ruling the country.”

His daughter is one of seven people jailed for satirizing the army in a street performance put on by the Peacock Generation troupe over the Burmese new year. Activists say the military in April and May brought 30 cases against people in Myanmar, where an energized youth movement has promptly answered a clampdown on critics of the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military.

Sitting bolt upright in a crisp white shirt and purple longyi, Sein Mya recalled his own service as a warrant officer from 1988 to 2007. His younger brother still serves, and has cut ties with the family since Sein Mya's daughter's arrest, a cold reveal of loyalties over which Sein Mya feels “nothing.”

But his daughter — “mentally strong and smart” — is now facing a judiciary that prioritizes the military over justice, and that torments him.

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Raising his spirits are the fresh-faced blue-shirted activists who attend her hearings, along with the trials of several others oppressed by the army. But they won't change anything, Sein Mya says, echoing a common line on the subject of the Tatmadaw and its pervasiveness in politics.

Criticizing a country's most powerful institution is usually a good litmus test of freedom of expression, so the imprisonment of

the young performers for a centuries-old parody tradition was decisive for a coalition of activists.

Four days after Kay Khine Tun was arrested, civil society groups such as Athan, Coexist Myanmar, and the Burmese-American Saddha: Buddhists for Peace, formed Doa-A-Yae, which circulated 12 names of those being penalized for free speech.

Journalists, activists, a director, a former military captain, and a monk — all either imprisoned or hounded by the courts in the past months — were to become a rallying point.

A 2010 photo campaign that saw dissidents, including Aung San Suu Kyi, pose with the names of political prisoners written on their raised palms was resurrected. But this time, the names would be of those suppressed under the government of Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which shares power with the generals under a military-drafted constitution.

Meanwhile, squads of Athan members began attending many of the court hearings in blue shirts, inspired by Win Tin, the longest-held political prisoner in Myanmar history. From his 2008 release to his death in 2014, Win Tin wore his blue prison shirt in solidarity with others being held.

“Our earnest desire is for Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other NLD leaders to see our campaign and remember when they were similarly persecuted,” New York-based activist Khin Mai Aung told *The Diplomat*. “And that they remember the roots of Burma's or Myanmar's pro-democracy struggle so that they lend us their support.”

Back then, when the country was united in opposition to the military, Suu Kyi had a

simpler role. After three years as Myanmar's *de facto* leader, she has become entangled with her old foe.

Under NLD rule, Myanmar has seen a genocidal slaughter against the Rohingyas in Rakhine state along with attacks on press freedom. At best she has remained silent as her once looming moral stature disintegrates in the West.

But the Myanmar public has rallied around its champion. Director and human rights activist Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi has denounced censure of Suu Kyi – even while government prosecutors pursue military complaints against him.

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In late May, activists waited for the director to arrive in a police truck at Insein township court, where two *Reuters* journalists were sentenced to seven years for their reporting on the atrocities in Rakhine state before being freed under a presidential amnesty on May 7.

Despite suffering from liver cancer, Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi has been denied bail and there are concerns he may die in prison.

He criticized the military in a series of Facebook posts, triggering an officer to file complaints under go-to clauses for shutting down such speech: Article 66(d) of the Telecommunications Law, which covers online defamation, and Article 505(a), which criminalizes statements that might cause military officers to “disregard or fail” in their duties.

“The Tatmadaw is suing people unjustly,” said a 19-year-old student outside the hearing.

“Yes, I want there to be justice,” added a 22-year-old activist also new to the free speech movement.

(A Myanmar military representative initially agreed to comment for this story, but then attempted to place restrictions on the reporting in return for responding to a written interview.)

Also donning a blue shirt was filmmaker Kyal Yi Lin Six, 33, a former student of the director. She had started a Facebook page where directors and activists from across the world upload photos of themselves holding #FreeMinHtin signs.

“Before this we had a small group, but by joining with Athan and other groups we have a stronger voice,” she said.

That afternoon at the Athan office, a typically confined apartment in muggy downtown Yangon, an electricity blackout has the activists sweating while talking expectations.

“We really hoped we wouldn’t need to protest again so much after the NLD was elected, but we really didn’t expect this,” said Aung Khant, 29.

“It’s like a typical government from the past,” said Ye Wai, 24. With a general election next year, he said, this is a dangerous time for activists as neither the army or government wants criticism aired about them.

More anonymous social media accounts are accusing the activists of creating “fake news” and being traitors who are funded by foreigners, he explained.

Illuminating Ye Wai’s face was a spreadsheet listing 47 peaceful protest cases in Myanmar — one has 17 defendants, including Athan co-founder Saung Kha, who is on his 35th court hearing for taking part in an anti-war demonstration over a year ago. He was famously sentenced to six months’ imprisonment in 2016 for posting a poem

saying he had a tattoo of then-President Thein Sein on his penis.

Saung Kha accepts the military is unlikely to drop its defamation cases because of the campaign, but “the more people that join, the more chance real change will be born.”

Modest change happened two years ago when steady civil society pressure produced amendments to Article 66(d). But many argued these reforms did not go far enough; for instance, they did not provide reasonable defenses to defamation such as reporting the truth or arguing an opinion.

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The renewed push for change is “quite significant,” said news outlet *Myanmar Now* editor Swe Win, a changing of the guard to a younger generation.

“As far as I remember, no uprising or revolution took place in Myanmar or any other country with the leadership of the older generation,” he said. “Most are led by the movement of the youth.”

Swe Win has his own defamation battle, for offending the supporters of ultranationalist monk Wirathu, who is now a fugitive after missing a Yangon court hearing on June 4 to face charges of sedition.

Being forced to travel the 780-mile round trip from Yangon to a Mandalay court twice per month has brought one positive.

“You can learn a lot about how the authoritarian system keeps on ruling quietly, which is good for me as a journalist,” Swe Win said.

Meanwhile, Mandalay-based monk Thawbita is also being sued under Article 66(d) for online posts that criticized the military.

He told *The Diplomat* that the court dropped the 505(b) charge at a June 6 hearing because of a lack of evidence.

Thawbita took part in the 2007 Saffron Revolution, monk-led mass demonstrations that “could not change the military’s mindset.”

“I have personally come to know the military is sensitive and can’t stand being criticized by the public. But active participation of the public today is better than no public interest,” he said, adding people “get to know the unfairness.”

This unfairness is what made nurse Kay Khine Tun speak out, and what will drive her abroad on her release, said her father.

“When there is injustice she will always stand up and speak out,” he said.

She was pressured into taking examinations for a military nursing school in 2014, he recalled. She received top marks for all the exams — except the essay, for which she wrote six pages praising Suu Kyi.

“A secret plan” that successfully got her rejected, Sein Mya said with a smile.

Ask her to write the essay again, and, like the other activists, she might prefer to focus on freedom of speech and assembly, press freedom, and other human rights that would make a democratic Myanmar.

Lorcan Lovett is a journalist based in Southeast Asia. Rita Shan provided translation for interviews in this article.

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