

Solidarity with Myanmar in Northeast Asia

Ilhong Ko

The global community has stood witness to the Myanmar military's coup d'état of February 2021, the subsequent resistance of the Myanmar people against the undemocratic actions of the junta, and the violence that has since been perpetrated by security forces towards demonstrating Myanmar citizens. International outrage and condemnation of the military junta has followed, and calls for solidarity with the Myanmar people have been heard throughout the world. However, amidst the continuing pandemic, global interest in the situation in Myanmar has waned over the past few months.

Articles are edited by Ilhong Ko (mahari95@snu.ac.kr), HK Research Professor, Seoul National University Asia Center.

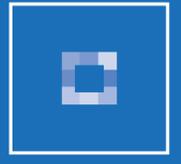
In this installment of *News from Northeast Asia*, we examine South Korean and Japanese responses towards recent events in Myanmar, with particular focus on efforts that have been made to encourage solidarity with the Myanmar demonstrators and how they have been received by the general public. In "Virtual Solidarity with Myanmar in South Korea through Hashtag Activism," Jungwon Huh of Seoul National University Asia Center explores how social media has played a critical role in

the formation of South Korean solidarity with Myanmar citizens. The fact that South Korean reactions to the events unfolding in Myanmar, rather than the events themselves, may have more heavily influenced online responses for solidarity with Myanmar citizens demonstrates the importance of active and vocal support for the pro-democracy movements in Myanmar. *Youth Action for Myanmar (YAM)* has played an essential role in organizing such needed support for Myanmar citizens. Mya Kay

Khine of Seoul National University, who is a member of YAM, introduces the various efforts undertaken by this organization in "2021 Spring Revolution and Activities of Myanmar Youth in South Korea." Of all countries of Northeast Asia, Japan has the longest history of engagement in Myanmar in the modern era. It is also the greatest contributor of Official Development Assistance to Myanmar. In "Japanese Society and Myanmar: Past Engagements, Present Responses," Inaba

SNUAC

Seoul National University Asia Center



The Seoul National University Asia Center (SNUAC) is a research and international exchange institute based in Seoul, South Korea. The SNUAC's most distinctive feature is its cooperative approach in fostering research projects and international exchange program through close interactions between regional and thematic research programs about Asia and the world. To pursue its mission to become a hub of Asian Studies, SNUAC research teams are divided by different regions and themes. Research centers and programs are closely integrated, providing a solid foundation for deeper analysis of Asian society.

(Fujimura) Mai of Kwangwoon University traces the deep relationship between the two countries, as well as the interactions that have been taking place between Japanese citizens and Myanmar residents in Japan as a result of the current events in Myanmar.

Virtual Solidarity with Myanmar in South Korea through Hashtag Activism

Jungwon Huh

Social media has played a critical role in the formation of international solidarity with Myanmar citizens in protesting the Myanmar coup. Due to this, the military junta has prosecuted journalists, and assaults on non-governmental media in Myanmar continue to take place, with the Myanmar military government blocking Twitter, Instagram, etc. However, the citizens of Myanmar and journalists have been braving blackouts and crackdowns to make sure that the world stays focused on what is happening in the country. For example, on June 14, Cape Diamond, a journalist covering Myanmar for global media outlets, tweeted the link to a Human Rights Watch report covering violence by the country's military. Within hours, more than 2,000 quoted tweets and retweets, mostly in the form of hashtags, were circulated throughout the world.

In South Korea, solidarity with Myanmar in the form of hashtag activism has been strong. Many Koreans have expressed ongoing, enthusiastic support for the Myanmar civil disobedience movement. One way of delineating South Korean civil society's solidarity activities supporting the Myanmar civil disobedience movement is by analyzing Google search trends and social media trends.

An analysis of Google searches on Myanmar within South Korea, prior to and after the Myanmar coup, shows that search numbers peaked on the day of incident [Fig. 1]. The second spike occurred the day after the first massacre on March 4, when at least 39 people were killed. The third spike dates to March 29, when the military killed more than 100 anti-coup protesters in Myanmar. After doing so, military generals threw a party to celebrate Armed Forces Day, angering many Koreans. On April 10, Myanmar security forces killed over 80 citizens with rifle grenades in an infamously violent incident, and Google searches for Myanmar spiked once again.

The spatial patterning of Google searches on Myanmar within South Korea reveals that, of all the provinces and major cities, the city of Gwangju witnessed the highest number of searches. This is significant because Gwangju is where a pro-democracy movement was suppressed by the military junta in 1980, during which hundreds of citizens were killed or went missing. It appears that the current demonstrations taking place in Myanmar, protesting the coup and the military's violent crackdowns, are not something that the people of Gwangju can ignore. Noting the similarities between the May 18 Gwangju Democratic Uprising that arose 41 years ago and the ongoing Civil Disobedience Movement in Myanmar, Gwangju citizens have been voicing solidarity with Myanmar citizens and carrying out various activities to support the Southeast Asian country's pro-democracy movement.

In terms of social media, 877,068 data points were collected for the period spanning from January 1 to July 31, 2021. The data points include tweets, YouTube and Instagram uploads, and news articles, with tweets accounting for 98% of these data points. Interestingly enough, the pattern for peaks in social media interest in Myanmar was found to differ from the patterns for Google searches [Fig. 2]. This may be because Google searches tend to represent the seeking of information by the public, whereas social media posts represent people's reaction to events and opinion forming.

Tweets about Myanmar increased by 1800%, compared to the same period of the previous year. Interestingly enough, the number of social media posts was higher on Myanmar on March 7, a day after the South Korean President Moon Jae-in talked about the Myanmar situation, compared to the number of posts from March 4, when the first massacre of Myanmar demonstrators took place. President Moon had written on social media that "The use of violence against the people of Myanmar must stop now. There

should be no more loss of life." The peak in social media interest in Myanmar remained strong for several days, possibly fueled by events such as the show of solidarity that took place in Gwangju every Saturday in March by more than 100 civic organizations. March 22 witnessed another peak of interest. Events that preceded this peak include the March 12 public demonstration by Buddhist monks and Myanmar activists, who marched from Myanmar's embassy in Seoul to the office of the UN Human Rights Council, where they prostrated themselves. That same day, the Ministry of Justice announced that special stay permits would be given to Myanmar nationals on humanitarian grounds.

The patterns present in the Google search trends and social media trends indicate that South Koreans have consistently shown interest in the Myanmar fight for democracy, but there have been fluctuations in the degree of that interest. An interesting fact revealed though the analysis is that the degree of interest shown by Koreans has been heavily influenced by statements made by the Korean government, public figures, civil organization protests, as well as the tragic violence by the military junta.

Jungwon Huh, HK Research Professor,
Seoul National University Asia Center.
Email: jwhuh@snu.ac.kr

Fig. 1

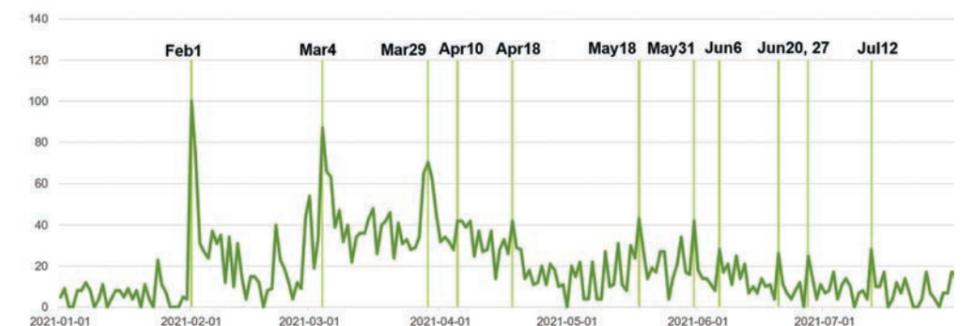


Fig. 2

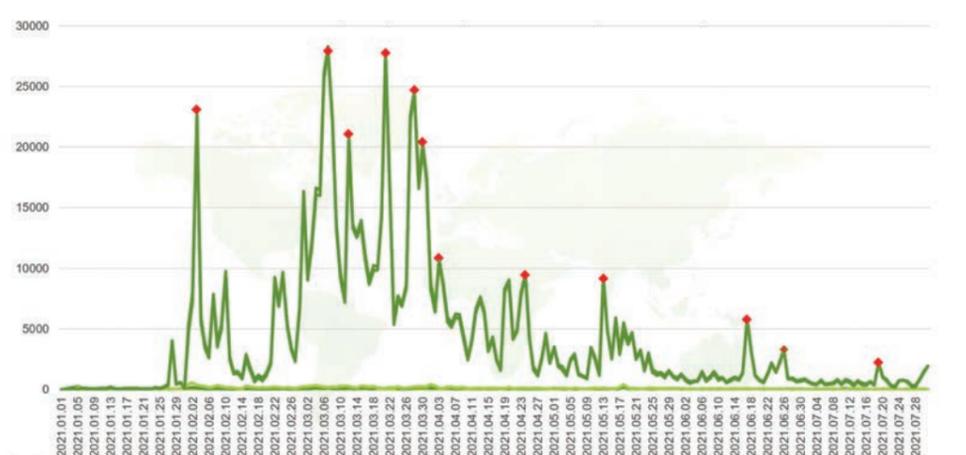


Fig. 1: Graph showing the Google Search Trends for Myanmar from users based in South Korea (Jan 1 - July 31, 2021).
Fig. 2: Graph showing the Social Media Analysis Trends for Myanmar from users based in South Korea (Jan 1 - July 31, 2021 - Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, News).

2021 Spring Revolution and Activities of Myanmar Youth in South Korea

Mya Kay Khine

Youth Action for Myanmar (YAM) is an organization formed by Myanmar youths residing in South Korea. Formed just after the military coup in Myanmar with the intention to support the pro-democracy movements of Myanmar citizens, YAM was founded by several Burmese international students studying in South Korea with help from the Korea Committee for Overseas Community Organization (KOCO). YAM members have been participating in various activities and events supporting the pro-democracy movements in order to let the world hear the voices of Myanmar citizens.

YAM has organized a series of on-going protests since March. Silent protests have taken place every weekend in Insa-dong, Seoul, a key tourist attraction. Donations received from passersby at these protests are, in turn, donated to the pro-democracy movements in Myanmar. Every week, protests also take place in front of embassies in South Korea. At protests in front of the Thai embassy, Indonesian embassy, China embassy, and many more, it is possible to hear participants speaking out against the military junta.

In addition to protests, YAM has undertaken a variety of other activities to support Myanmar's pro-democracy movements and to garner interest from the Korean public. There have been interviews with various broadcasting stations. YAM has visited universities as well

as elementary, middle, and high schools to give talks about the situation in Myanmar. YAM has often been invited to events hosted by religious organizations to speak out for Myanmar. Members have met with political leaders online for discussions and have been involved in several campaigns in collaboration with other NGOs. It can therefore be said that YAM members have been almost everywhere in South Korea in order to deliver the voices of Myanmar citizens, who are suffering under the military junta. To keep delivering the news about Myanmar to the world so that its citizens will not be forgotten is one of the key missions of YAM.



The situation in Myanmar has recently changed as a result of the sudden surge of COVID-19. The situation has become worse day by day. The third wave of COVID-19, which hit Myanmar in July, put the country into renewed turmoil. In July, the per capita death rate in Myanmar surpassed that of Indonesia and Malaysia, becoming the worst in Southeast Asia. The dramatic increase in the number of infections and deaths caused great concern, particularly because public hospitals are now mostly closed: doctors and other staff have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement, refusing to work under the military junta's rule.

This unfortunate concurrence of events has contributed to the deterioration of the situation in Myanmar. The number of people who have died as a result of the virus cannot be counted, and the author and other members of YAM have had close relatives pass away due to lack of medical treatment. The military cannot handle the situation well because the citizens of Myanmar have no trust in them. Moreover, they are banning the sale of medical equipment, such as oxygen concentrators, to civilians who are not supported by the military junta. COVID-19 is thus being used by the military junta as a weapon to suppress those who stand against them.

Myanmar citizens in Korea are also facing difficulties. After the military seized control of the country, many withdrew their savings from bank accounts because they did not trust the junta. As a result of the cash shortage and banking crisis that followed, Myanmar students, in particular, have faced delays in payment of tuition fees and monthly allowances from home, leading to financial

difficulties. In addition, the suspension of shipping line operations has meant that document submissions (e.g., for college, work, etc.) have inevitably been delayed, often leading to rejections from jobs or colleges. YAM has therefore organized a scholarship program to help students ease their financial burden. Sponsored by the organization Together with the World (세상과 함께), YAM was able hand out scholarships to more than 70 Myanmar students in July 2021.

Although necessary to demonstrate a rejection of the military regime, the time spent participating in YAM activities as been a costly expenditure for many of its members. However, an indifference towards the situation in Myanmar will inevitably bring about a sense of guilt. YAM members, therefore, have no choice but to walk a tightrope, juggling a sense of guilt and the need to secure time for their personal lives. Unfortunately, this has often led to mental health problems. The stress felt by YAM members has been alleviated somewhat by the strong support that South Korean citizens have been showing for democracy in Myanmar. In participating in various movements as a YAM member, the author met many Koreans who had great interest in Myanmar's situation and came to join YAM in its movements and campaigns. For the Myanmar citizens who are fighting against the powerful military, this support from Korean citizens is a great encouragement indeed. The fact that Myanmar voices for democracy are heard by someone gives strength and the will to continue fighting until victory is achieved. One of the key reasons for YAM's existence is to ensure that these voices are heard, in pursuit of democracy.

Mya Kay Khine, Undergraduate Student, College of Business, Seoul National University. Email: mkk1010@snu.ac.kr

Fig. 1: Protest in front of the Chinese Embassy. The picket reads "The Chinese government should stop sitting on the sidelines regarding the Myanmar military coup" and "Stop cooperating with the Myanmar junta that massacres its citizens"(Photo courtesy of Yun Waddy).

Japanese Society and Myanmar: Past Engagements, Present Responses

Inaba (Fujimura) Mai

There is a well-known Japanese children's book, also made into a film, called *Harp of Burma* by Michio Takeyama. First published as a series in a magazine in 1947, shortly after Japan's defeat in World War II, the book is set in Myanmar at the end of the Asia-Pacific War. Its main character is a Japanese soldier. The work is so well known that just mentioning "Myanmar" evokes the book's title for many Japanese. As such, it can be said that the relationship between Japan and Myanmar is built on war.

General Aung San, known as the founding father of Myanmar and the father of Aung San Suu Kyi, worked alongside the Japanese fighting the British army during his time as an officer of the Burma Independence Army (BIA). Although General Aung San later engaged in armed struggles against the Japanese, the training of Myanmar's independence forces by the Japanese military would later contribute to the formation of a close relationship between Myanmar's military and Japan. Myanmar's military anthem (which can be found on YouTube) provides an interesting example. The anthem's melody is popular in Japan and is often played as background music in pachinko parlors, revealing the close and unusual relationship between Japan and Myanmar's military. Currently, Japan is also the greatest

contributor of Official Development Assistance (ODA) to Myanmar. In 2019, Japan's ODA contributions to Myanmar totaled 189.3 billion yen, including loans, grants, and technical cooperation. With the exception of China, which does not disclose information about aid contributions, Japan is the largest contributor to Myanmar. It is perhaps for this reason that the current Japanese government has put very little pressure on Myanmar's military under the pretext of an "inflow of Chinese capital" to the country.

However, there is growing discontent among Myanmar residents in Japan regarding Japan's ambiguous stance towards Myanmar's military. Currently, there are 35,000 Myanmar people residing in Japan. This is roughly eight times the number of residents compared to a decade ago. In the 1980s, the majority of residents were foreign students, but after the 1988 military coup, more people fled Myanmar as a result of government crack-downs on pro-democracy movements, and the number of Myanmar refugees bound for Japan rapidly increased. Moreover, after 2013, as the number of "technical trainees"¹ and laborers increased, young people in their twenties came to make up the majority of the Myanmar population in Japan.

The military coup of February 1st, 2021, was widely reported in Japan. On February 3,

about 1,000 Myanmar residents in Japan gathered in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo to protest against the coup. Protestors demanded the release of detained government officials – including the country's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi – as well as the reopening of the National Assembly following last year's general election, which saw the ruling National League for Democracy (NLD) win a landslide victory. The protestors also aimed to raise awareness among the Japanese public of the use of violence and the lack of concern for human rights on the part of Myanmar's military. They urged the Japanese government to take a more committed stance. Protests and demonstrations were also held at the Japan Myanmar Association, the United Nations University, and in smaller cities throughout the country [Fig. 1].

The reactions in Japanese society to the desperate actions of its Myanmar residents were diverse, but what stood out most were the cold responses. Statements critical of the movement, such as those that protested the "import" of Myanmar's fight to Japan, opposed the fact that foreigners were protesting in Japan, or, fearing cluster infections, objected against protests during the Coronavirus pandemic, began appearing online. Perhaps as a response, protestors began giving speeches and shouting slogans not only in Burmese but also in Japanese. Protest leaders would appeal in Japanese: "Put international pressure on the Myanmar military." Protesters would then respond ("We beg you!") and bow in the Japanese style. One protestor even appeared wearing a placard that read, "Despite the Coronavirus disaster, I must protest, and I apologize to all Japanese citizens." Protestors also posted messages on Facebook and Twitter asking for sympathy from the Japanese public.

Protestors have also been oppressed. Technical trainees have been warned at work that they would be fired if found to have participated in protests, and there are also examples of workers having been asked about and criticized for their protesting. Nevertheless, Myanmar residents of Japan are not surrendering. In order to spread awareness of the ruthless actions of the military and police in Myanmar, many young people are working in solidarity with the "Digital Resistance," sacrificing sleep to share

photos and videos of conditions in Myanmar with the world through the Internet.

Despite the inhospitable reaction of much of the Japanese public, there are some citizens who support the protests. For instance, one group of Japanese conducting business in Myanmar used crowdfunding to raise 15 million yen in three weeks to provide food and medical supplies to poor households. Civic organizations are also very active. On March 4, a non-profit organization, Mekong Watch, and the AYUS International Buddhist Cooperation Network together submitted a joint request to the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Japanese International Cooperation Agency (JICA), the Japan Bank for International Cooperation (JBIC), and the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism. This request demanded an investigation into sources of funding to Myanmar's military, including ODA, and other business activities related to the military. Thirty-two organizations involved in the Myanmar pro-democracy movement also participated in submitting this joint request.

The Korean public, with its history of winning democracy through a fierce democratization movement, quickly offered solidarity to the citizens of Myanmar following the military coup. The Japanese public, on the other hand, has often been apathetic to issues abroad. In particular, discriminatory views and a lack of empathy towards the rest of Asia continue to be major problems for Japan. Establishing solidarity between Japanese citizens and the Myanmar residents of Japan is essential in order to successfully appeal to both the Myanmar military and the Japanese government. Under the current circumstances, unfortunately, this seems unlikely.

Inaba (Fujimura) Mai, Associate Professor, Kwangwoon University. Email: vientoviento@naver.com

Notes

- 1 The goal of the foreign technical trainee system is to support foreign nationals who have acquired skills and knowledge in Japan so that they can contribute to economic development in their developing home countries. However, the system suffers from several problems, such as poor working conditions and delayed wages.



Fig1: Myanmar residents in Japan protesting at Osaka Castle Park on Feb. 7, the first Sunday after the military coup. (Image provided by Takeda Hajimu, reporter at The Asahi Shimbun).