

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 to 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 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" 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.)