



## Episode 5

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# **Resisting coup d'état: Determination & hope are key**



This is a transcript from [CIVICUS Voices](#) - a podcast series produced by CIVICUS. In this 6-part series, we will be joined by civil society experts and on-the-ground activists to tell us about their experiences with protesting.

## **Aarti Narsee (Host)**

Welcome to another episode of CIVICUS Voices with me Aarti Narsee, a Civic Space Research Officer at CIVICUS. As you might know by now, we're using this season of CIVICUS Voices to really dig deeper into Freedom of Peaceful Assembly. That is the right to protest. We've spoken to people across the Global South and all around the world. On today's episode will focus on something that has happened in many places around the world, a coup d'état. We will be zooming in on Myanmar, as an example to unpack protests in the context of coups.

This French expression translates directly to a stroke of state. And what it basically means is the overthrowing of a government to remove the government or seize it. This can be by a political faction, a rebel group, by the military or even a dictator. And it's only one way that a regime change can happen. As you can probably imagine, a coup d'état is not always peaceful. And there are often protests involved. On today's episode, we'll be focusing on Myanmar as an example on which a coup d'état took place, formerly known as Burma in the South East Asian region. On the first of February in 2021, Myanmar military junta took over control from a democratically elected ruling party, which was just about to sway in new members after the election. The new military power declared a state of emergency, called the election results invalid and detained the president and many other activists. Protests and civil resistance have sprung up across the country in opposition to the coup, using the three-finger salute as a protest symbol. Research from the CIVICUS Monitor paints a concerning picture about what's been happening in Myanmar. One year after the coup, we found that civic space violations have been continuing unabated. Peaceful protests have been violently disrupted. The junta has arrested or prosecuted both activists, students, protesters and journalists, and political prisoners have been tortured or ill-treated. As of June, 1900 civilians have been killed by the military group, and over 14,000 people have been arrested. The United Nations and many others have condemned the coup, and some members of the international community have imposed sanctions. But regional efforts to address the crisis or to stop the grave human rights violations taking place in Myanmar have been minimal. On today's show, I'll speak to some people who are involved in the fight to understand the situation on the ground better. And to also get a sense of what do people in a country that have experienced a military coup go through?

Let's dig into this with an interview. I'm joined by Thinzar Shunlei Yi, the Advocacy Coordinator at Action Committee for Democracy Development. They've been fighting for justice for years, and have written a book chronicling the country's last decade, prison atrocities, and possible future. Thinzar, thank you so much for joining us on CIVICUS Voices.

## **Thinzar Shunlei Yi (Guest 1)**

Thank you for having me too.

**Aarti:** Let's just start with your experience to set the scene. What is it been like being on the ground in Myanmar and describe the civil resistance taking place?



**Thinzar:** So this is the first ever sort of mass movement, and we call it revolution. So the military attempt to seize the power since February 1st, 2021. But the coup plan that they have carried out is not yet complete, because of the strong resistance inside and outside the country, as well as because of solidarity and support from different democratic organisations and different movements around the whole country. So the military is not yet succeeded in controlling the whole country. So that's how I feel it's so powerful to be on the ground along with our fellow countrymen and women taking a leadership position on the ground and especially the Generation Z, the young generations, basically leading on the ground. Also they were sharing their ideas. So it was so powerful, and kind of for myself being an activist in the past 10 years. This is the first time I feel empowered with our own movement and really encouraged because we felt like this is the first time that we are on the right track towards a genuine federal democratic nation.

**Aarti:** It's amazing you're describing, you know, this resistance, this activism. But at the same time this activism is being met with threats. Can you tell us about the threats you and others have faced? And how do you take that into account when planning to form some sort of protest on the streets?

**Thinzar:** So threats and torture, as well as all different types of atrocity are happening across the whole country since long time ago. So even in the past 10 years, we call it a democratic transition. And the 2008 constitution, everybody knew that we had a first ever election in 2015 we had the first civilian government being in power. But everybody was aware that the 2008 constitution is not for a genuine civilian leadership, because the military was still in power, they control 25% in the parliament, as well as they control key ministry in the executive body. As well as they are everywhere, right? in terms of businesses, in terms of human resources, even in the ministry, civilian ministry, they are there changing their uniforms, and they are always there. So as myself, for example, way before the coup, I was forced to relocate from my house because of my campaign during the election. And, and for the minorities group, including Rohingya, there were a genocide carry out in Rakhine State, as well as the other ethnic minority were fleeing away from airstrikes, just in 2020 December. So you can imagine the threats are always there. But this revolution, I feel like we are trying to turn this terrific and horrific situation into an opportunity for our revolution for advancement of our freedom of expression. So we've managed to get on the street like millions of people; almost a month-long protest. Now it's still there. It's already more than 505 Day under the coup attempt, but still, there are protests nationwide. We have around 20 protests almost every day around the whole country.

**Aarti:** So you talk about, you know, the ongoing protests that are taking place, tell us a bit more about the kinds of creative ways that people in Myanmar, and particularly young people are standing up to the military power.

**Thinzar:** We young generation were ruled by military dictatorship for the past seven decades and so on, you know, we never were ruled by the civilian leaders in a genuine form, right. So we always see threats are always there around the corner. And so I would say the young generation, especially young politicians, activists, and leaders, were trained to always find the alternative. We always remind ourselves that our generations or previous generations have already suffered enough. Now is our time for us to find a way and with the help of technology, with the help of social media, the young people learn that there is always a way. Amid all the intense oppression and discrimination, there is always a way because we are the majority inside the country. The military and their pro-military people are the minorities, even though they have weapons, there is always a way for us to form our own way of doing things like creative activism. So basically, young people use social media as a weapons and also young women like ourselves are using our own name, to speak up the truth, the situation of our people inside the country. So it's a powerful weapons that we use, free in our expression, under our own name. That's the way that we believe we will stay resisting the military, in the nonviolent ways in different ways online and offline every day.

**Aarti:** Now, in your experience, what do you think is the most effective and important way in bringing about long lasting change under the circumstances that are taking place in Myanmar?

**Thinzar:** So within 500 days, you can imagine we have done all sorts of activities, you just name it. We use art, we use music, we use all forms of nonviolent actions already taken out, taken out, and we ran out of ideas sometimes, but we still repeat it and we still use some effective way of doing things. For example, we fundraise using social media; we fundraise for our own movement. People are supposed to click on different ads on their social media or in YouTube channels and that will generate like foreign income to our movement. So that's one way. At the same time. I think amid all these different way of doing things, the only affective way is whatever we do, we stay principled. Because even there are three different resistant forms right now: political resistance and and resistance, right. And also there is an ideological resistance, we are changing things, we're changing things from the very grassroots. So it's so important, all of our actions are being governed and being controlled by the rightful ideologies for federal democratic nation. So we believe in human rights, we believe in democratic principles. So that's the way that we go forward. Whatever we do, we can do differently, but with the same principles.

**Aarti:** Later in the show, we'll be hearing from an activist that fights for this issue from outside the country. But in your experience, what can the international community do to support people in Myanmar?

**Thinzar:** Myanmar as a country, we have gone through many different experiences, even genocide, I will mention. And all forms of crimes are already there. So the violences, the atrocity, the violations are already there. But the newsworthy new thing, the new factor to our movement is the resistance and resilience of the people. So I want everyone outside Myanmar to be in solidarity with the peoples of Myanmar. That's the first thing.

We need; more of solidarity actions, not just for the people in Myanmar, because I felt what is happening in Myanmar is not just a threat to the Myanmar people. It's also a threat to democratic countries around the whole world, because the military just committed genocide five years ago, and stay freely killing people inside the country. It's totally intolerable. And as democratic organisations and countries who believe in democracy must take proactive action to hold these perpetrators accountable. Because they became that institution, the military institution became a threat to a humankind. They are still torturing people, they have killed 2000 People like freely killing, using all the weapons that they have, even airstrikes. Freely bombing, killing, torturing. They have arrested 14,000 people, democratic dissidents. So I think as long as they are stay freely killing, that's the failure of all of us, all of our democratic institutions. So the main ask from our generation is just an accountability. We don't want any dictator, including Min Aung Hlaing in Myanmar to walk freely. So I want everyone to stand up and do something to hold these perpetrators accountable, including countries like U.S United States, to join the ICC (International Criminal Court), ICJ (International Court of Justice) and the international justice mechanisms to hold these perpetrators accountable.

**Aarti:** Thinzar, Thank you so much for joining us on CIVICUS Voices.

**Thinzar:** Thank you for having me today.

**Aarti:** That was Thinzar Shunlei Yi, the Advocacy Coordinator for the Action Committee for Democracy Development. And what really stood out in terms of interview is the power of the younger people in Myanmar; that is Generation Z that are fighting against injustice, and against the military junta. Amazing how they're using technology, social media to raise funds. And it's also really important that they are calling on the international community to impose greater pressure on Myanmar to make sure that the military is held accountable for the injustices going on in the country. As I said earlier, we'll be sticking to one particular issue that is looking at the coup in Myanmar in today's episode, and what exactly is unfolding in the country. For an on-the-ground perspective, we will now hear from someone fighting this fight from afar. Wai Hnin Pwint Thon is a Burmese activist currently based in Geneva, working as a Senior Advocacy Officer at Burma Campaign UK. Her father has been on the forefront of Burma's democracy movement for over 30 years, and is a former and current political prisoner. Let's have a listen to her story.

### **Wai Hnin Pwint Thon (Guest 2)**

My name is Wai Hnin and I am a Senior Advocacy officer at Burma campaign UK. I am a Burmese human rights defender and daughter of a political prisoner. And I have been fighting for human rights and democracy in my country for over 12 years now. And it's been really sad to see the current situation in my country at the moment. I'm sure in the beginning of the coup, a lot of people noticed thousands of people protesting on the street and across the country. And of course, now it's over a year later, people being "oh maybe there are no more protests in Burma now, people are not going out to protest". But it's wrong because, of course, there are more and more restrictions, arbitrary arrest and unlawful killing happening every day, but people are still protesting; but in a very creative style, in flash mob style, or even sometimes, you know, silent strike happening.

So these acts of defiance and these acts of freedom of assembly are happening, even with all the restrictions that they are facing in the country. You know, the situation in the country is very devastating. But we are also seeing the sense of solidarity and unity growing across the country, which is very encouraging for us. And, of course, we are not simply calling for democracy anymore, we are calling for an inclusive type of federal democracy that includes everyone, regardless of your gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or religion, which is a very encouraging thing for us. And in terms of protests, one thing stood out to me was the silent strike that we did on the one year anniversary of the coup. And there were a lot of pressure from the military, to normal people that “oh, you can't take part, if you take part, then you will be arrested”. So even shopkeepers, they come out to, you know, open their shops, but they say “sold out, we can't sell anything”. So you know, they are coming up with a creative way to stand up against the military. And this type of creativity, and even sometimes a humorous way of protesting is very important to keep us going for our struggles. So I am very encouraged to see the young leadership in the country, and the sense of solidarity and unity that is growing in my country. Personally, it's been hard because my father was arrested on the first day of the military coup, because he is one of the troublemakers who started protests. So he was arrested on the first day of the coup, even before he could start any protest this time. So him being in jail is quite hard, because I don't know when I will see him again. And I don't know when I will be able to go home again, because of my activities. If I go home, I'll be arrested. But you know, given all that, I am in a position because of my personal situation, I can help people who are going through the same thing. So I try to look at it in a positive way, and support people as much as I can. Of course, you know, the people in Burma are very determined, I think determination is very important. And that's why they keep going on even over a year later. We have over 13,000 political prisoners in jail at the moment, but even then people are still going out to protest. And of course, we have an ongoing civil disobedience movement, which means teachers, doctors, nurses, and other professionals are not going to their jobs because they want to shut down the military government system. So they are doing all these protests against the military in many ways possible. And of course, the help from international community is very important and that we feel a little bit frustrating because we don't have much support from international community, for people in jail or for people who are still going out to protest. So people inside the country are risking everything they have and including their lives. And they need to be supported by the international community.

**Aarti:** That was Wai Hnin Pwint Thon. What really stood out from what she said is the resilience and the creativity in the types of protests that are taking place in Myanmar. From flash mobs to silent strikes with even shopkeepers, nurses and teachers are standing up in acts of defiance and civil disobedience, even with all the restrictions that they face. And the other thing that struck me is that Wai Hnin will never really be able to go home because of the concerns for safety and because of the restrictions and the violence that activists in Myanmar are currently facing. One other thing that really stands out for me on today's episode is how important international support is. Both of our guests talked about it. And this is because international support can have a huge impact in changing a crisis.

By support I mean things like creating awareness, supporting activists online, supporting a humanitarian cause that can aid a particular crisis, calling for action from your government, or organisations or representatives of the country in crisis in your own home country. Organising and attending local campaigns and protests about issues everywhere. And supporting civil society work which is incredibly important in fighting for fundamental rights and also boycotting products and supporting actions. These things can really make a difference. So wherever you are, consider how you and the organisations you're linked to can make a huge change.

Now that brings this episode to a close. I hope it gave you a look into what it's like for people in countries where governments have been overthrown, and who faced great threats. If you want more resources on this topic, make sure to look at the Burma Campaign UK and the Action Committee for Democracy Development. The title of Thinzar Shunlei Yi's book is "Mon combat contre la junte Birmane". We have one more episode in store for you on the season of CIVICUS voices. It'll look at protests in relation to refugees. We'll release a new episode every two weeks. You can find CIVICUS online and on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Subscribe, listen and rate the podcast on your favourite podcast app. Thank you to our brilliant guests featured on today's episode. CIVICUS Voices is produced by Amal Atrakouti, Elna Schutz, Jamaine Krige and the CIVICUS team. My name is Aarti Narsee. Goodbye.

