



Karen Human Rights Group

Documenting the voices of villagers in rural Burma

Interview

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Mergui-Tavoy District Interview: Security forces intimidate anti-coup activists in T’Naw Th’Ree Township, February 2021

This interview describes events that have been occurring in H--- Town, T’Naw Th’Ree [Tanintharyi] Township, Mergui-Tavoy District since early February 2021. The interviewee, a civil society activist, shared his perspectives on the February 1st 2021 military coup d’état¹ and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).² He also recounted his participation in anti-coup demonstrations in H--- Town and reported being followed by the security forces because of his involvement in the protests.³

Interview | Ko⁴ A---, H--- Town, T’Naw Th’Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District (March 2nd 2021)

When did you start getting involved in the Civil Disobedience Movement?

I started getting involved in the CDM on February 6th 2021. On that day, we distributed three-finger salute⁵ stickers to the [local] people. On February 7th, we did the three-finger salute movement [we started protesting]. [...]

Did you distribute those stickers on February 6th?

Yes. We started distributing the stickers on February 6th until February 13th. General Aung San’s birthday is on February 13th. [...]

¹ On February 1st 2021, the Burma Army deposed the democratically elected government led by the National League for Democracy (NLD). The military proclaimed a year-long state of emergency and transferred power to Min Aung Hlaing, the Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar’s Armed Forces. Based on unproven fraud allegations, the Tatmadaw invalidated the landslide victory of the NLD in the November 2020 General Election and stated it would hold new elections at the end of the state of emergency. The coup d’état occurred the day before the Parliament of Myanmar was due to swear in the members elected during the 2020 election. Elected President Win Myint and State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi were detained, along with ministers, their deputies and members of Parliament.

² On February 2nd 2021, healthcare workers across Myanmar spearheaded a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and initiated labour strikes to protest against the February 2021 military coup. The movement quickly spread to other branches of public service, eventually turning into to a nationwide, large-scale civil disobedience campaign.

³ The present document is based on information received in March 2021. It was provided by a community member in Mergui-Tavoy who has been trained by KHRG to monitor human rights conditions on the ground. The names of the victims, their photos and the exact locations are censored for security reasons. The parts in square brackets are explanations added by KHRG staff.

⁴ Ko is a Burmese title meaning older brother. It can be used for relatives as well as non-relatives.

⁵ The three-finger salute is a rallying gesture against totalitarian rule adopted from the Hunger Games books and movie series where it was used as a sign of solidarity and support. It became a pro-democracy symbol in Thailand after local protesters adopted it to show their opposition to the 2014 military coup. In Myanmar, the salute became a symbol of opposition to military rule in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup.

How did you react when you first heard that the military had taken over power?

I did not do anything when I first heard about it. We were just waiting to see the situation. On February 6th, [someone] [...] informed [me] that a group of people were marching in the streets and holding a protest on Hleh Dan Road.

Is it in Yangon?

Yes.

What was the reaction of other people in Tanintharyi region?

I don't know about other people's reaction. [...] I tried my best to support the CDM. I am not trying to be a leader of the CDM. I just tried to support the CDM so it would run smoothly. I contacted [a KHRG researcher] and shared information about the situation. I also got involved in the 1988 uprising, so I should keep a low profile. I cannot show my face in public. On February 6th, we distributed stickers to the local people. Since then, the [security forces] have been trying to investigate and follow me [see below].

What is your opinion on the CDM?

As long as the State Administration Council (SAC)⁶ runs the country, we will never be able to achieve federal democracy. [...]

When did you start getting involved in the protest?

I have been participating in the protests since the beginning, until today.

When did the protests start?

We started protesting on February 7th [every day until February 11th], and then we rested on February 12th. We resumed [the protests] on February 13th, on General Aung San's birthday [every day until February 20th]. Then, we rested again on February 21st and resumed on February 22nd [every day until February 26th]. Then, we rested on February 27th and resumed on February 28th. We did not want our children to go out on March 1st because we thought things could get violent [on February 28th, the security forces killed at least 18 demonstrators throughout the country in what was the bloodiest day since the military coup at the time].

Who leads the protests?

We do not have leaders or organisers. We all participate together. We, generation X, are standing with them [younger protesters], and generation Y is just supporting generation Z. We cannot stop them and prevent them from protesting. There were many young protesters but we do not have leaders or organisers. It is also similar in Yangon.

How many people joined the protests on February 7th 2021?

There were around 100 people [in H--- town] on the first day of protests. The day after, there were fewer protesters in the town. Then, I contacted [a KHRG researcher] on February 13th and the threats started. I told him that we were threatened [by the police and Tatmadaw]⁷ and needed some help. I asked the local ethnic people to join us.

When did they start threatening you?

From February 7th to February 11th 2021, they always followed us.

⁶ The State Administration Council (SAC) is the executive governing body created in the aftermath of the February 1st 2021 military coup. It was established by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on February 2nd 2021, and is composed of eight military officers and eight civilians. The chairperson serves as the de facto head of government of Myanmar and leads the Military Cabinet of Myanmar, the executive branch of the government. Min Aung Hlaing assumed the role of SAC chairperson following the coup.

⁷ Tatmadaw refers to the Myanmar military.

Were they police or Tatmadaw soldiers?

They were police, Tatmadaw soldiers, Special Branch [Police Special Intelligence Department] and detectives. However, the Special Branch did not follow us often.

When did the violence happen? Since the day the protests started until now?

No, nothing happened.

Didn't they use violence from the start?

No, they did not. The violence happened on February 28th 2021.

What happened on February 28th 2021?

The violence happened in Dawei and H--- towns on February 28th 2021. But we did not see them following us on that day. [Seven or eight police officers] would usually follow us, but on that day we just saw one or two of them following us. They are following us at night and trying to arrest us. Young people have to hide. We also have to be careful, but we do not need to hide. They are arresting the young people who are more popular or active at night. Then, they prosecute these young people under section #505 [of the Penal Code]. Therefore, young people have to flee and hide.

What is section #505?

It is in the Myanmar Penal Code. Whoever makes, publishes, or circulates any statement, rumour or report will be sued. It can be used during the Covid-19 period [to prosecute people who participate] in public gatherings.

Which day was the worst day, or the biggest day of protests?

It was on February 28th 2021. It was the biggest day of protests. Five or six countries participated [the interviewee seems to be referring to the Milk Tea Alliance, an online pro-democracy solidarity movement made up of people from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, and Myanmar]. It was the biggest day.

How many people joined?

There were many people, around 10,000. I also took videos. [...]

Did the civilians start the violence?

No, they did not.

How did the civilians protest or react to the use of violence by the police or Tatmadaw soldiers?

No violence happened in our area.

Do you mean that the police or Tatmadaw soldiers did not use violence?

They could not because we held the protest quickly and we dispersed quickly too.

Did they throw tear gas or fire rubber bullets to disperse the protesters?

No, they did not. Our town is not very big. There are many [police officers and soldiers,] but they are fewer in number than the civilians. Therefore, they do not dare to use violence. But now, we heard that they have been increasing their numbers. They called police officers and Tatmadaw soldiers from other towns, so we stopped the protests temporarily. [...]

How many times have you participated in the protests? What made you participate in the protests? [...]

I experienced it [protests] from 1988 [8888 uprising] until I went to college. We were tortured and oppressed. Later, I also experienced the Shwe War Yangung [Saffron] Revolution [August to October 2007].

So you have experienced military rule.

Yes. [...]

Do you have a concern for your safety?

I joined the protests [to document what was happening]. But I try to support young people as much as I can. We cannot have influence, be a leader and order the youth to do this and that nowadays [we cannot stop the youth or order them not to protest].

Do you plan to take part in other protests against the military?

I just arrange what they [protesters] need during the protest.

So you arrange what they need.

Yes. At this time, there is no village head or administrator [protesters are all going in the same direction, there are no leaders].

What is your opinion on military rule?

As you know, no one prefers military rule. They [the Tatmadaw] also know that people don't like them, but they still continue it. I have experienced it and I do not like them since I was a [high school and college] student. The civilians do not like them. We want to consider the future of the youth and the younger generations, religion, ethnic people and justice [if the military stays in power, the younger generations will not have a future]. Also, we want the countries from all over the world to see the situation. Young people in our country are more educated as well.

Do you think the civilian government will get the power back?

I do think they will get the power back. However, given the current situation, I think it is more or less up to the UN to solve this problem. [...]

What do you expect from the CDM and the protests?

I hope the youth and younger generations will get higher education and good healthcare in the future. I don't think about anything else. [...]



These photos were taken in February 2021 in H--- Town, T'Naw Th'Ree Township, Mergui-Tavoy District. They show local civilians holding anti-coup protests. [Photos: KHRG]

About KHRG

Founded in 1992, the Karen Human Rights Group is an independent local organisation committed to improving the human rights situation in Southeast Myanmar. KHRG trains local people to document and gather evidence of human rights abuses, and publishes this information to project the voices, experiences and perspectives of local communities. More examples of our work can be seen online at www.khrq.org.

Mergui-Tavoy (Tanintharyi) District

