

Commentary

# 1988-2021: Will Myanmar's Uprising Succeed This Time?

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## **The uprising in Myanmar continues to grow. Will it defeat the military dictatorship this time?**

“Nothing has been able to defeat Burma’s military regime—so far, anyway.” This was how I opened an opinion piece written right after the previous military regime crushed the monk-led Saffron Revolution in 2007. Sadly, it still applies today, with a new military regime in power. But for how long will it be true?

The uprising’s goal is the same as ever—to topple the military regime. The times, the tempo and the tactics, however, have changed.

During rush hour this morning, vehicles of various descriptions suddenly came to a halt in the middle of a number of the main roads, streets, bridges and flyovers in Yangon, their drivers all claiming some mysterious “mechanical failure.” Of course, the vehicles didn’t really break down. It was just the latest method deployed by protesters in their ongoing resistance to the military regime—creating congestion on the road to prevent civil servants from going to work, while urging them to join the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). On social media, it was jokingly dubbed “The worst day for car breakdowns the world has seen!”



*Commuters stop their cars in the middle of the road on a river-crossing bridge in Yangon on Feb. 17, 2021 to prevent government staff from going to work. / The Irrawaddy*

In the two weeks since the military coup, a significant number of civil servants as well as many workers from private banks have joined the CDM, staying away from their offices. But some workers continue to show up at work.

Political activist groups; young protesters belonging to Generation Z; the overthrown National League for Democracy; and the general public are all trying to persuade those civil servants who are still going to their offices to join the CDM. They believe that an all-inclusive CDM could bring the military government to a standstill and hasten its end. Apparently feeling the heat, coup leader Senior General Min Aung Hlaing has urged civil servants to go back to work more than once in his

public speeches. A spokesperson for the regime warned on Tuesday that its patience toward those in the CDM has its limits.

Such requests and warnings by the regime indicate that the CDM is having an effect.

During the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, many civil servants also stopped going to work, but the situation was different then. Many government workers joined the general protest against the then socialist authoritarian regime, but were forced to return to work after the military staged a coup on Sept. 18, 1988. The then military regime managed to keep the government running.

This time, civil servants launched the CDM just a few days after the military seized power. The regime's police and troops have tried to force some civil servants to return to work—so far without success.

After the cars “broke down” this morning, crowds of people started flowing onto the streets to join the protest. By noon, hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of protesters had flooded Yangon's busy junction near the Sule Pagoda. At the same time, tens of thousands of peaceful protesters took to the streets of cities and towns, small and large, across the country. The number of people participating in protests nationwide is believed to be in the millions.



*Anti-military regime protesters in downtown Yangon on Feb. 17, 2021. / The Irrawaddy*

Back in 1988, when my student friends and I took to the streets, all messages regarding the next day's plans were passed around by word of mouth before we protesters dispersed on the streets. There were no mobile phones; even land lines were scarce, let alone the internet. The way protesters these days, especially young people, prepare via chat rooms and social media for the next day's rallies is impressive and organized.

One huge difference between the two uprisings, now and in 1988, is political legitimacy. Back in 1988, there was a power vacuum, as there was no elected party or government to take over after the uprising toppled General Ne Win's authoritarian regime. This time, the coup leaders seized power from the elected ruling NLD government led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and President U Win Myint. And the result of the general election held in November 2020 is not in doubt—the coup leader's repeated claims of electoral fraud notwithstanding.

US President Joe Biden's characterization of the latest coup is accurate: “A direct assault on the country's transition to democracy and the rule of law.”

If you are closely following this growing uprising, you will know that to the people of Myanmar, the coup is an unjust war by the regime against its own people and the country's fledgling democracy—a blow against their hopes for the future.

That's why all of these people—from all walks of life—have taken to the streets to fight back peacefully with all their will over the past two weeks.

It is true that the history of the country—and of the world, for that matter—shows that peaceful uprisings are rarely a match for an evil spirit backed by military might. In Myanmar, peaceful popular uprisings failed to remove military dictatorships in 1962, 1988 and again, so far, in 2021. Combining the mighty power of the gun with evil spirits, the dictators always prevail. When I took to the streets in 1988, 33 years ago, our uprising was met with a bloody crackdown; we weren't able to bring about democracy until decades later.



*Anti-military regime protesters in downtown Yangon on Feb. 17, 2021. / The Irrawaddy*

Even under such circumstances, the people of Myanmar still dare to revolt against injustice. But today—while their spirit of unbowed and defiant opposition to dictatorship is unchanged—the times, the tempo and the tactics are quite different.

In a brief speech to the crowd in downtown Yangon on Wednesday afternoon, Ko Min Ko Naing, a veteran student leader of the '88 Uprising, recognized that the participants in the current uprising span Generations X,Y and Z, and can draw on a shared experience to keep the protests moving forward. He reminded them to make the most of the difference between 1988 and now, saying: “This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century,” meaning Myanmar is no longer the closed society in which he helped to lead an uprising 33 years ago. He emphasized that joining the CDM means more than simply not going to work; it means defying every order the junta issues.

Then, his raised voice reverberated through the streets of downtown Yangon, as he and the protesters joined in the classic call-and-response rallying cry that has been heard during many of Myanmar's popular uprisings: “Our Cause...” “...Must Succeed!”

**Kyaw Zwa Moe**

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• The Irrawaddy. 17 February 2021 :  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/will-myanmars-uprising-succeed-time.html>