

# **Amid Myanmar's post-coup violence, there is one township in Yangon that 'scares the military'**

Monday 5 April 2021, by [HAACK Michael](#), [HLAING Nadi](#) (Date first published: 4 April 2021).

- **North Okkalapa in Yangon is renowned for its lawlessness and illicit activities but it has also been central to Myanmar's protest movements for decades**
- **Since the February 1 coup, the battles between security forces and protesters in North Okkalapa have been some of the fiercest**

Zarni was 20 years old when he received a life sentence for his involvement in Myanmar's 1988 uprising, although he had his sentence commuted just in time to join the 2007 Saffron Revolution. He now runs a youth centre in North Okkalapa, which he says is "the only township in Yangon that scares the military".

Home to more than 300,000 people, North Okkalapa is one of the largest working-class communities in Yangon. Infamous for lawlessness and illicit activities, it has also been central to Myanmar's democracy struggle for generations. In March, it was the site of some of the worst clashes between protesters and security forces since the junta deposed the [democratically elected government on February 1](#).

"North Okkalapa is a place where you will get the three-digit lottery: drugs, sex work and people begging," said Elliot Prasse-Freeman, a professor at the National University of Singapore who conducted field research in North Okkalapa.

"But you will also get people with enough money to sponsor senior monks for Dhamma festivals or *taya pwe*. You have a sweet spot where there are enough resources to do something but not so much that you become separated from the people."

North Okkalapa was founded in 1959 as one of three satellite townships created by General Ne Win's military government as part of his campaign to clean up Yangon. His targets were the people who lived in informal settlements at the centre of the city.

"The bulldozers came and knocked down their huts, and there was an effort to save everything they could," said James C. Scott, a professor of Political Science at Yale University who was a student at Yangon University at the time. "They were packed into military trucks and driven out to Okkalapa. There they were just dropped and left."

The areas that were cleared were strongholds of support for Ne Win's rival U Nu and Scott suggested the evictions were politically motivated.

"The effort to scatter and disperse your enemies has advantages all by itself," he said. "If you relocate them into refugee villages, then they are easier to police, patrol and surveil."

The sudden displacement instilled a strong sense of identity. On the city's margins, a fierce spirit of resistance against state oppression was born. Aung Myat Thu, a 23-year-old activist and native of North Okkalapa, said the neighbourhood's working-class struggles fuel its resistance.

"Everyone is poor," Aung Myat Thu said. "We have nothing. We have to survive by any means necessary. That's why illegal things happen here. We become united because of our social class."

North Okkalapa featured heavily in the military's 1960 report "Is Trust Vindicated?: A Chronicle of the Various Accomplishments of the Government Headed by General Ne Win". The report touted the boxy houses and small streets as paragons of development. But its housing structures and narrow lanes made the area uniquely suited to outrunning authorities and barricading areas from military assaults.

During the 1988 uprising, residents of North Okkalapa beheaded suspected government informants and killed police officers with arrows made from bike spokes. Of the areas around the country that came to be ruled by the protesters, North Okkalapa was the last to surrender to the military, which finally subdued the population after deploying the air force to bombard the area.

"People of North Okkalapa are more ready to resist the military than other people because we have always been oppressed and discriminated against by the military junta, even in normal times," Zarni said. "There are so many side alleys, or *lan-gya*, in North Okkalapa. The soldiers and police dare not enter because they don't know how to get back out."

In recent years, Yangon's growth has transformed North Okkalapa into a bustling township with day spas, universities and other businesses. But this has not changed what Zarni calls the "North Okkalapa style".

"When we disagree, we do it openly and frankly," he said. "We always speak the truth and fight out our differences. Then at the end of the day, we'll sit down together for dinner and drinks. That's our nature."

North Okkalapa has produced activists who have led Myanmar's democracy movements. The most prominent is Min Ko Naing, the legendary student leader of the 1988 uprising.

Since the coup in February, the carnival-like atmospheres of the early protests have been [replaced by all-out street battles](#). The clashes between security forces and protesters in North Okkalapa have been some of the fiercest.

"If there is a vanguard, then they are it," Prasse-Freeman said.

On March 3, [military regiments opened fire on crowds](#) in North Okkalapa. At the hospital, medics decided to temporarily break their strike to treat the wounded. At least six people were killed, three shot in the head and three in the stomach. Another 18 were seriously injured.

The mortal danger has not stopped activists like Aung Myat Thu.

"Life under the military regime is meaningless," said Aung, who lost a close friend to army snipers during the protest. "The longer the protests last, the more my blood boils. I feel sad. I feel angry. I am not afraid to die."

The violence has escalated further in recent days and martial law has been imposed on the township. While some protesters in other parts of Yangon have been deterred from entering the streets, many in North Okkalapa have continued to defend themselves with barricades, slingshots, arrows and

Molotov cocktails.

Zarni said the residents have earned admiration throughout Yangon because “they all know that North Okkalapa never retreats and never bows”.

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South China Morning Post

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