

Myanmar Student Strike: We Don't Need No Thought Control

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Education is the lifeforce for critical thinking, public discourse and enables democracy to flourish through a thoughtful citizenry. Yet, the junta is deliberately obstructing the next generation of thought leaders' ability to access education, as well as actively killing, arresting, torturing teachers and students, and suppressing other basic human rights.

In recent weeks, pressure has been mounting on teachers and students to return to their jobs and studies or face the consequences from the junta, leaving some [fearful](#) and others defiant. Within the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and within the wider Spring Revolution, students, teachers, parents and Ministry of Education staff have been steadfast in their refusal to attend school or work under the illegitimate junta. These groups have coined the term "military slave education" in their messaging, not wanting to be enslaved under the junta's control.

While the junta would like to project a 'business-as-usual' façade to the international community, the reality on the ground is far from this. An overwhelming 80 percent of teachers are in [fearful](#) of the CDM, and over 90 percent of University students are boycotting classes, showing their defiance and rejection of the junta's unlawful power grab and the military controlled education system, but also expressing solidarity for their classmates who have been killed, injured, abducted, arrested and forcibly disappeared. The All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU), a network of student unions throughout Myanmar, is one organization exemplifying [strong](#) solidarity for their fallen classmates and those in detention, with regular statements and activities resisting the coup. On 13 May, ABFSU [called](#) out the torture and murder of their fellow member, 21-year-old Myingyan Technology College student Zin Ko Tun who was part of a resistance group in Talokemyo Village. Zin Ko Tun had a tattoo of the ABFSU flag on his arm, which [appeared](#) to be brutally burned off during a torturous interrogation. ABFSU condemned this cowardly act and responded with a pledge to continue their resistance in honor of their fellow member.

Another method of suppressing the voices of teachers and students who have joined the CDM movement, is arbitrary arrests and draconian sentences under the vaguely worded sections of the Penal Code (505a and 505b). The junta, through its media mouthpiece Myawaddy TV, [announced](#) those taking part in protests would face the wrath of the Penal Code, and citizens should inform authorities of education professionals taking part. On 13 May, Dr. Cho Yu Mon, a Hpa-an headmistress, was arrested after taking part in a red ribbon campaign in defiance against the junta, and [sentenced](#) to two years imprisonment under section 505b. Additionally, student leader Ko Thant Zin Tun, was sentenced to six year imprisonment under section 25 of the Natural Disaster Management Law for allegedly breaking COVID-19 restrictions and 505a of the Penal Code for "disturbing public tranquillity." Meanwhile, a diverse group of teachers and staff at the Ministry of Education have been sacked or suspended for being linked to the CDM, including an [enormous](#) 13,000 academics and staff according to the University Teachers' Association (UTA). In unison with these tactics, the UTA says the junta "used various unjust means, including pressure on families, in an attempt to suppress the CDM battle of teachers and staff at various universities by offering

positions and other incentives, arresting and imprisoning some leading teachers, killing, intimidating, and attempts at coercion.”

Since 1 February, it is also not uncommon for security forces to [occupy](#) and monitor schools and universities, which has some fearing for their safety. While many students and teachers are vigilant and able to evade arrest, that is not always enough. Plain-clothed pro-military thugs [calling](#) themselves Pyu Saw Hti, are targeting those who reject the junta, inflicting beatings and arresting people arbitrarily. According to the Radio Free Asia, their membership is made up of a cohort of USDP (the proxy political party for the military) members, MaBaTha (ultranationalist group of monks and laypeople with links to and support for the military), retired soldiers and military sympathizers and act on behalf of the military and police to search for and arrest those in the CDM. Through their Facebook group network, Pyu Saw Hti abducts those within the CDM, acts as informers for the military junta and tries to infiltrate the pro-democracy movement by masquerading as pro-democracy activists or supporters.

Behind this education boycott is a feeling of wider [disillusionment](#) with the education system, which through successive military regimes from 1962 has long served to attempt to brainwash people to be submissive to the military. Additionally, students feel the education system serves the needs of the military to their detriment, with graduating students leaving higher education without work within their chosen field or forced to take menial work in other countries or unable to find work at all. One 23-year-old engineering student laments that “[The people of Myanmar] have experienced military slave education in the past,” he said. “A university student’s future can be full of opportunity, but those opportunities are [now] gone.” One potential hope is for the [establishment](#) of an interim education program next month through the legitimate National Unity Government (NUG). The NUG’s Deputy Education Minister, Ja Htoi Pan, plans to roll out a diverse and robust education reform that reflects the history and experiences of ethnic minorities.

Myanmar has signed and ratified the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which among other basic human rights, guarantees education for all. Given the attempted coup and the disruptions to education due to COVID-19, an entire generation of children and university students are suffering. For those in protracted displacement the situation is at breaking point, as prolonged periods without formal education is creating ‘a lost generation’ of Rohingya children, including the [400,000](#) in Bangladesh and [65,000](#) in Rakhine State. Education is the lifeforce for critical thinking, public discourse and enables democracy to flourish through a thoughtful citizenry. Yet, the junta is deliberately obstructing the next generation of thought leaders’ ability to access education, as well as actively killing, arresting, torturing teachers and students, and suppressing other basic human rights.

The international community must recognize the role of the CRPH, NUG, and EAOs in their education service provision plans, and support these initiatives. They must also support students and teachers to realize the right to education and their aspirations for a fully-fledged federal democracy that guarantees inclusive education based on equality and self-determination. The international community can help bring this about through meaningful and concrete actions to end the junta’s reign of terror, including supporting a global arms embargo within the UN General Assembly’s upcoming resolution. Additionally, the UN member states have the power to support the Myanmar people’s movement and the legitimate NUG, by sanctioning the junta’s leadership and cutting them off financially, while also providing cross-border humanitarian aid to those in need. Furthermore, states must unify to refer the situation in Myanmar to the International Criminal Court and join the Gambia’s effort at the International Court of Justice. Young students deserve to go to school and lead Myanmar into the future, one that is free from the military’s tyranny and embraces opportunities for them to fully utilize their potential and capabilities.

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