

Myanmar: ‘We will never kneel down’: Protesters change tactics in face of rising death toll

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As the military brazenly guns down its own citizens in ever-larger numbers, activists are finding new ways to resist.

It was about 5:30am on Thursday, March 25, and the sky had just begun to lighten above Hlaing Station Road, in Yangon’s Hlaing Township. Protesters were gathering, many dressed in traditional ethnic attire and holding flowers and water bottles.

“This is for our Dawn Spring Flower Strike,” said Sai Moan Lyan, 28, a Hlaing resident who has helped lead numerous protests in the township. He was dressed that day in the beige-coloured garb of the Shan – breezy, wide-legged trousers and a button-down shirt with rounded collar.

The roses and water bottles were meant as offerings of sorrow for their fallen comrades in the pro-democracy movement. About 100 people showed up. The “flower strike” was one of the many new tactics that activists have been surreptitiously deploying in recent weeks, as the military’s response to nationwide protests has grown increasingly lethal.

In a March 3 crackdown in Yangon’s [North Okkalapa](#) Township, soldiers fired machine guns; by March 29, in [South Dagon](#), they were launching rocket-propelled grenades at protesters armed with slingshots. March was also the month the Tatmadaw deployed its 77th and 33rd Light Infantry Divisions, notorious for their brutality in Rakhine State and in other ethnic nationality areas, to urban areas of Yangon and [Mandalay](#).

More than 700 people have so far [been killed](#) – nearly all since the start of March – and the rising toll has forced protesters to rethink their strategy.

By about 7:30am on March 25, the protesters had dispersed from Hlaing Station Road, leaving in their wake a welter of flowers and water bottles. Their message had been registered. Photos of the event spread online.

“No one was harmed today,” Moan Lyan said. “For us, that’s a victory.”

Silent but potent

Although the military’s brutality and the rising death toll have deterred many from taking to the streets, they have not broken people’s determination to resist. Many are responding to the security forces’ violence by formulating new protest methods that they hope will minimise casualties.

“[The security forces] shoot people in the head and stomach, so it’s difficult to confront them [directly],” Ko Lyan Htet from the Revolutionary United Front activist group, a member of the

General Strike Committee, told *Frontier* on March 25.

In the third week of March, protests shifted from noon start times to the pre-dawn hours in cities and towns across the country, in an effort to avoid confrontations.

“Now we do it when they [security forces] aren’t around,” Moan Lyan said. “By the time they arrive, we’ve scattered.”

New tactics have also included leaving children’s dolls on the road instead of protesters. Engineering students have left silent armies of dolls in construction helmets on streets, and medical students have left them out in white lab coats. In each, anti-military slogans were scrawled across signboards and left with the dolls. These inanimate stand-ins were seen in Yangon’s Hlaing, South Okkalapa and Kamayut townships, among others, gaining widespread notice online.

Moan Lyan said these “strikes without people” began in Myitkyina, the Kachin State capital, but quickly spread around the country by word-of-mouth and on social media.

On March 22, three days before the Dawn Spring Flower Strike, residents in Hlaing launched hydrogen balloons carrying messages of protest into the air.

“We used red and black balloons and tied slogans to them before launching them,” Moan Lyan said.

Soon, the sky was filled with phrases like “The Revolution must win”, “The coup government must fall” and “We support CRPH” – referring to the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw, a group of elected MPs claiming to be Myanmar’s legitimate government, in place of the military council, which has declared the CRPH unlawful.

“Previously we could only protest on the ground, but now we can reach the sky,” Moan Lyan said. “If they shoot down balloons, people will not be hurt.”

On April 6, protesters in cities and towns across the country smeared red paint and handprints on roadways and bus stops to symbolise all the civilian blood the military has shed since the coup began.

Protesters say these new forms of protest are needed to sustain people’s morale, but some have gone beyond just morale-boosting. Perhaps the most tangibly successful of these new tactics came on March 24, when a “silent strike” quieted the usually noisy streets of cities across the country, bringing both work and leisure to a halt.

Ko Nan Lin, a protest organiser who works with other former University Students’ Union members, said the idea for the silent strike emerged from talks among student unions in Yangon, other general strike committees, and frontline defence teams in the commercial capital.

The strike shuttered markets, shops and factories in Yangon and elsewhere in the country, as millions of people stayed home in protest. It angered the junta so much that soldiers were dispatched into the empty streets. Without a crowd of civilians to fire upon, however, they found there was little they could do.

“In some Yangon wards, the military even came and told people to leave their homes and go to work as normal, and to open the shops,” Nan Lin said.

The regime also targeted major shopping malls and supermarkets, including branches of City Mart, that had closed for the day. On the evening of March 24 it ordered managers to come to Yangon’s

City Hall for a meeting, and then held them overnight.

The next day, about 70 owners of shopping centres, malls and other outlets were reportedly ordered to attend a meeting at a military facility in Mayangone Township, where a senior officer from Yangon Region's military command told them they'd be jailed if they continued to support anti-coup activities.

Ko Moe Thway, chair of the Generation Wave activist group, said the success of the silent strike had deeply embarrassed the junta.

"It [the Tatmadaw] wants to rule the country, but if no one works, the regime's entire bureaucracy is shut down," he said. "The silent strike avoided drawing crowds of people onto the street but still demonstrated the strength of the people's resistance to military dictatorship."

New forms of dissent

Protests may never again look like they did in February, Moe Thway admits, thinking back to a time when hundreds of thousands of people took to the streets each day in cities and towns across Myanmar. But as the pro-democracy movement hunkers down for a long fight, the success of the silent strike has inspired youth and general strike committees to plan more activities that undermine military rule while avoiding civilian casualties.

"When they use machine guns, it's hard to hold mass street protests," he said. But that does not mean the end of resistance, he added.

"As the military becomes more oppressive, new forms of dissent are emerging," Nan Lin said. "We will never kneel down before the military dictatorship."

People have also been encouraged by the continued impact of the [Civil Disobedience Movement](#). Striking civil servants have crippled the regime's ability to run the economy, keep [hospitals](#) open or to govern more generally, while [boycotts](#) of military-owned companies and their products have seen some of the most popular cigarette and beer brands in the country disappear from shop shelves. The children of Tatmadaw generals have been [publicly shamed](#) at home and abroad, and their companies have also been boycotted. Many people are also [refusing](#) to pay taxes to a government they don't recognise as legitimate.

"We have stopped paying taxes and we do not buy military products. The boycotts of businesses with links to the military will continue, and if they can be sustained for a long time, the Tatmadaw will not be able to keep running the country," Moe Thway said.

Nan Lin said the Tatmadaw is helpless against forms of protest that can't be stopped with terror and violence - the only methods it knows.

"If silent strikes continue," he said, "they won't know how to respond."

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