

Myanmar - ‘We want democracy back’: Despite hardships, Yangon’s urban poor vow to fight on

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Working class communities may have been among the hardest hit by the coup, but despite their struggles many remain determined to see the military overthrown.

Among the wood, bamboo and tin homes that sprawl over several acres in one of Shwepyithar Township’s largest slums, Ko Kyaw Thu Htet begins to weep silently as he contemplates life under a military dictatorship.

“Many lives have been sacrificed, including innocent children,” he says. “The democracy that we want is very expensive – we have to sacrifice a lot to get it.”

Kyaw Thu Htet has seen this sacrifice first-hand. The 24-year-old bricklayer has been a regular member of frontline protest teams in the northern Yangon township since shortly after the coup, and on March 3 security forces shot and killed a man in his 30s standing near him.

The death occurred during a confrontation with police and soldiers outside Sein Gay Har shopping centre in Hlaing Township; Kyaw Thu Htet was one of 128 people arrested that day. Despite initially facing a charge of incitement under section 505(a) of the Penal Code, he was released on March 24, together with 97 others arrested three weeks earlier.

The arrest didn’t deter him. Shortly after returning home, Kyaw Thu Htet and his wife, a 24-year-old garment worker, immediately re-joined the protests, stopping only when it became impossible to evade the growing number of police and soldiers on the streets.

Kyaw Thu Htet has vowed not to return to work until the revolution succeeds. For now, he’s relying on his wife and his father, who is also a bricklayer, in order to eat. Life is much more difficult, but Kyaw Thu Htet said he would dedicate every waking hour of his remaining life to the protest movement.

“We just want to get democracy back. We hate the military dictator,” he told Frontier, referring to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing.

From Shwepyithar to Hlaing Tharyar, North Okkalapa to South Dagon, Yangon’s working-class neighbourhoods have been among the most resistant to military rule. Scores have been killed, with security forces deploying battlefield weapons to subdue street-level opposition. Since mid-March, these industrial townships have been under martial law, with a stricter curfew than elsewhere in the city and many criminal cases heard at military tribunals.

These townships have also been among the most affected by the economic fallout from the February 1 coup, which prompted the World Bank to last month downgrade its forecast for Myanmar’s

economy in 2020-21 to a 10 percent contraction. Others are warning of a contraction as large as 20pc, and possible economic collapse.



A man in Shwepyithar Township makes a pillow from waste materials sourced from factories. Sales have declined precipitously since the coup. (Frontier)

Many households in these areas were already [struggling](#) due to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, after the National League for Democracy government ordered two stringent lockdowns last year.

“With savings already drained, many poor households have been forced to reduce consumption to cope,” the World Bank warned. Combined with “existing welfare challenges”, the impact of the coup would “likely result in a sharp increase in poverty, heightened food security risks, and deeper destitution for those already poor”. Since mid-March, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers have left Yangon due to lack of work and security concerns, [returning](#) to rural areas where there are very few jobs and they are reliant on the support of relatives.

Much of this economic fallout has been self-imposed, in an effort to deny legitimacy and revenue to the junta. The [Civil Disobedience Movement](#) has [shuttered banks](#) and [disrupted trade](#), while street protests have prompted many [businesses](#) to lock their doors. The closure of government facilities, particularly [healthcare](#), has also disproportionately affected the poor.

Frontier spoke to a number of people living on the outskirts of Yangon, who before the coup typically worked in insecure, low-paid jobs. Despite the hardship they faced, they said their support for the revolution remained undiminished, and they lay the blame for the economic crisis squarely on the military for illegally toppling the NLD government.

Ma Hla Witt Yee, 25, lives with her husband and their four-year-old son in Nya ward of Shwepyithar.

They run a small business making pillows using leftovers from the township’s many factories. Hla Witt Yee said that even at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, sales were not as slow as they have been post-coup. Previously, they could bring in about K50,000 a day – about a third of which was profit – but that figure has dropped to K10,000 since February, the couple said.

Like other interviewees, Hla Witt Yee said her financial problems could only be resolved through a political solution to the country’s crisis – for her, that means the release of detained NLD leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and the end of military rule.

“We’re not just hoping for our business to recover,” she said. “No matter what happens, if the country remains under the military, our desire for democracy will not change.”

Hla Witt Yee’s cousin, Ma Thiri Mon, 24, also works in the pillow-making business in Shwepyithar. A single mother, she lives there with her brothers and now her parents, who moved in after the coup because of their own financial difficulties. Like her cousin, Thiri Mon is also facing economic disaster and had been unable to pay the interest on a debt owed to a moneylender since before the coup.

But Thiri Mon said she was more concerned about the impact military rule would have on her daughter and future generations.

“Our children’s education has already been delayed because of COVID-19,” she said, referring to the year-long closure of schools due to the pandemic. “I’m very concerned for my child’s future.”

She said children could only thrive in a democracy, where they have access to information and freedom of expression. “If not, they won’t be able to express what they believe,” she said.



Children play in an informal settlement in Shwepyithar Township. (Frontier)

Many have made sacrifices to contribute to the resistance. They include a 42-year-old woman, also from Shwepyithar, who requested anonymity due to fears for her safety.

A single mother and a businesswoman, before the coup she lived in a large, comfortable two-storey home. Shortly after the military takeover she got involved in the anti-coup movement, not only joining protests but also providing cash and in-kind support to demonstrators and striking workers.

She was arrested in Tarmwe Township on March 3 during a large-scale crackdown on protesters and sent to Insein Prison in northern Yangon. Since her release three weeks later, she has moved to a slum in Shwepyithar, where she has resolved to live and support grassroots communities until the revolution prevails.

“Do you know why I’m so determined? Only when we win will those arrested be able to go back home. Most of them are from the working class,” she said.

“Wealthier people are more afraid than grassroots workers ... most of those who are really willing to make sacrifices for democracy are from the grassroots.”

Across the Hlaing River from Shwepyithar, the industrial suburb of Hlaing Tharyar has seen many of its factories close temporarily or permanently since the coup, due to lack of orders, raw materials or workers. Several Chinese-run and other foreign-owned factories were also set alight shortly after security forces massacred more than 50 people in the township in March.

About two-thirds of its residents, many of whom are first-generation migrants to Yangon, have since left for other parts of the country, according to labour rights groups and residents.

Those who remain face a struggle to survive.

Ma Thin Thin Aye, 35, a resident of Hlaing Tharyar’s 20 ward, gave birth to her third child a few days after the coup. A former leader of a local labour movement, she was unable to join the resistance because she was looking after her young daughter.

In November she left her job at a garment factory in Mingaladon Township to open a tailor shop at her home because she wanted to run her own business. Until February, she earned a healthy income of about K300,000 per month sewing dresses, but now brings in just K50,000. Her husband, a

construction worker earning a daily wage, has also struggled to find work since the coup.

The couple spend K60,000 per month on rent, leaving them little to get by on each month. But unlike many of her neighbours, Thin Thin Aye has stayed in Yangon because, she said, life would be even more difficult in her Ayeyarwady delta hometown of Mawlamyinegyun.

"If we go back there, our lives will be worse than they are now because we won't have any income. We just wish to get back Mother Suu. We'll only be able to live peacefully when we get her back," she said.



A motorcyclist rides past a Chinese-owned factory in Shwepyithar Township that was burned in late March. (Frontier)

Although some tentative signs of an economic recovery are evident, Ko San Yu Maung, the general secretary of Action Labour Rights, said the factories that had reopened were operating well below their full capacity.

"Since the military coup, people have found it really hard to earn a living. They are all in a state of fear. They go to work today despite feeling under threat from security forces because if they don't work, they won't have any money for food tomorrow," he said.

Business owners, too, have been badly affected. One small business owner from South Dagon Township, who is also a member of local resistance group the South Dagon People's Guards, said that prior to the coup he had been hoping to expand his business, but the military takeover had crushed these plans. Instead, he's been forced to lay off his workers temporarily.

"I sent all my employees back to their villages," said the man, who didn't want to reveal the type of business.

He said his business – and the economy more broadly – would only recover when the political situation improves.

"Politics is the foundation of a country. Without a good and stable foundation, everything will suffer – not just the economy, but also things like education and healthcare," he said. "So we just have to survive as best we can for now – we can't expect a good economy until we are successful [in gaining democracy]."

Ma Zin Mar Win, 22, is another migrant worker who has remained in Yangon. She's managed to keep hold of her job in a factory in South Dagon that processes preserved fruit. She works there with her two sisters, aged 24 and 28, to support a young brother and their mother.

The family is originally from Pyapon in Ayeyarwady Region, about 125 kilometres southwest of Yangon, and moved to the commercial capital six years ago in search of work. Until the coup, they had been slowly but gradually building a better future for themselves, putting away some of the K600,000 they earn each month so they could one day buy their own home.

But the periodic closures of the factory since February 1, either due to a lack of raw materials at the factory or difficulties reaching their workplace, mean the sisters now only take home about K400,000 a month. Although this is enough to survive on, Zin Mar Win said the coup had robbed them of a better future. “We were trying to improve our lives, but how we can do that in this situation?”

Safety is a major concern in these outlying townships. Residents are scared of the security forces, and some days there’s either no transport available to take them to the factory or they are too afraid to make the journey.

Zin Mar Win said she fears every day for herself and her family.

“We’re not safe during the day or at night because they [security forces] are shooting recklessly. We’re terrified of being hit, whether at home, on the street or at work,” she said. “We want to get back the peace we once had.”

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P.S.

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