

# Myanmar: The Audacity of Angry Folks

Friday 18 June 2021, by [TENG Tiffany](#) (Date first published: 30 March 2020).

**Musicians and poets in Myanmar have long been linked to political activism, and this is still true today. Though expressing their opinions and fighting for human rights may get them into trouble, these rebellious and audacious spirits channeled their anger into starting progressive social movements.**

Last December, Zin Linn and two activist friends attended the pro-Suu Kyi rally at Yangon's Mahabandoola Park during the televised hearing of the International Court of Justice (ICJ). They sat at a table with a sign: "I stand against genocide, change my mind," a play on the [Steven Crowder meme](#). They distributed two flyers: [The 10 Stages of Genocide](#) translated into Burmese, and the 2008 Constitution's definition of the concept of a "state"—which declares the state as those in the government organisation.

"My anger taunts me. I feel guilty not taking action about the causes I care about. In this case, there were so many innocent people in the crowd who didn't understand ICJ or even [what] Aung San Suu Kyi [stands for]. I want to show people I'm not part of this inhumane event," Zin Linn told *New Naratif*.

It wasn't the first time this 23-year-old folk musician has expressed his opinions in bold, dangerous ways. Under the name Angry Folks, he performs folk songs at workers' and indigenous rights protests around the country. Most of his time in 2016 and 2017 was spent eating, sleeping and singing for strikers in Yangon's industrial zones. With his flat cap and guitar, he's like a modern-day Bob Dylan or Woodie Guthrie.

## Channelling anger into music

Music and poetry can be powerful tools for activism, hitting emotional notes that research papers or studies can't. Since the colonial era, Myanmar has had a history of poets writing about issues like discrimination, says Mayyu Ali, a Rohingya poet who wrote an [open letter](#) to State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, published on Al Jazeera. "I want my poetry to build bridges between divided ethnic communities."

Bands like Side Effect and Rebel Riot use music to express their frustrations with the former military government's destruction of human rights, education and creativity.

These artists are driven by an attitude of, "If not me, then who?" They feel responsible for representing the oppressed and voicing what others are too afraid to say. In turn, they have inspired a generation of young musicians and writers to do the same.

For Darko, the lead singer of Side Effect and founder of the NGO Turning Tables Myanmar, music is an outlet for channelling anger into positive change. Side Effect's recent songs have political undertones, like "Meiktila", which addresses the conflict between Muslims and Buddhists. "New Outfit" is about the military government changing its appearance while its systems remain the same. Since 2004, the rock band has been writing and performing original indie punk and alternative

songs. In a country that still prefers soft rock ballads and local covers of international songs, they were way ahead of their time.

Artists in Myanmar have regularly been thwarted by arbitrary exercises of state power. Drummer Tser Htoo reflects on the nonsensical censorship laws. "If the censorship board wasn't happy that day, they would change the whole song," he says.

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Desperate for new music, he and Darko would ask friends with wealthy parents to buy cassettes from abroad. Since the 88 Generation, a pro-democracy student movement against the military junta, even the most progressive artists fell silent as they watched hardcore activists sent to prison. The removal of the censorship ban in 2012 and access to the internet made finding new music possible, but didn't reverse decades of living in a controlled bubble.

"Young people are angry. They want to reverse what the previous generation did," Darko says. He knows, because he was one of them. But he turned his anger into Turning Tables in 2013, to give youth from different backgrounds an opportunity to make music together. It isn't easy for an NGO to create a social movement, let alone a rockstar. But his experience with Side Effect helped him tap into a network of conscious musicians.

"If we stop pushing, [the government] will take our rights back. All they want is power," he says.

Darko is just giving the youth what he wanted as a rebellious teenager: A platform to express his frustrations. It's a time of opportunity, when Facebook, YouTube and Instagram can connect musicians to youth beyond the urban hubs.

But such work comes with repercussions in a country like Myanmar. Zin Linn says he's been followed by "secret spies"—normal for political activists—and received a serious death threat earlier this year from a National League for Democracy (NLD) supporter living abroad. Zin Linn received a call from this person, who told him that they would hire someone to kill him. This was after Zin Linn had posted photos on Facebook from the ICJ rally and a University of Education student strike, where he supported research-based education and stable education policies.

## **Fuel and motivation**

Floke Rose is one rapper who became famous after his song "[Education](#)," about the failed system in Myanmar, won Turning Tables' Voice of the Youth competition in 2017. His rap usually has social undertones. He recently released "[Let Them Fly](#)," a song about child labour. In the music video, images of kids selling jasmine garlands at traffic lights and serving in tea shops send a powerful message. Ironically, he recently began performing at universities, in front of the very professors who he's accused of perpetuating the system.

Similarly, when Zin Linn attends protests as Angry Folks, his music is the protestors' fuel. "Some people don't consider it art. They think it's too literal," he says. But his transparent song lyrics motivate the strikers. He only cares about raising their spirits as they stand for long hours.

Rebel Riot started playing punk music shortly after the Saffron Revolution, a series of economic and political protests in late 2007. "Punks are not politicians. We don't care about votes or elections. Musicians care about making people happy," says lead singer Kyaw Thu Win.

The punk movement is all about rebelling against the system and self-expression. While Myanmar society perceives their black clothing, piercings and dyed hair as alien and unfamiliar, Kyaw Thu

Win says that all they want is to spread love and kindness. He's also started projects such as Food Not Bombs, Books Not Bombs and Free Mobile Shop, allowing people to communally share items.

"Complaining can be a waste of energy. We forget what we can do," he says.

Because they don't earn any money through music, Rebel Riot and the punk community support themselves with the Rebel collective. They share a community space and sell screen-printed T-shirts and studded belts.

"We don't want normal jobs. We don't want to be a player in their Monopoly game, followers of that capitalist shit," says Kyaw Thu Win. Instead, they've chosen to earn their own livelihood by doing what they love. He also believes in the "molecular revolution", a concept that "might take 200 years" but involves "creating their own light in a dark world." This energy cannot be destroyed, only recharged with kindness. They refuse to repeat the government's mistakes.

"I try to awake myself, so I can awake others," says Kyaw Thu Win, who cites Sex Pistols and Zen Buddhism as major influences.

Both Kyaw Thu Win and Darko have created counterculture movements in a volatile Myanmar. "If you're not happy with the world you were born in, create your own," says Darko.

### **Art Garden Rohingya**

Like music, poetry has the power to inform and rile, whether it is read in solitude or aloud. Rohingya poet Mayyu Ali has been displaced in Kutupalong refugee camp in Cox's Bazaar since 2017, where he writes about his pain and suffering to represent his fellow Rohingya. At a poetry event in Yangon last year, he was Skyped in to read his poem, connecting with Myanmar poets like Maung Saungkha for the first time. "Poetry has no religion, no borders," says Ali. Those who read his poems can get a better understanding of the discrimination, administrative policies, hatred and loss of hope. He feels a strong duty to continue this tradition of poetry: "They can erase our culture, but they cannot erase my writing."

Ali has received requests to teach poetry from Rohingya youth who found his poems online. They've reached out to him on Facebook Messenger, hoping to write like him. From this emerged Art Garden Rohingya, a collective of young aspiring poets, artists and musicians. There are over 200 poets, eight of whom are female. They write every day, eager to get their feelings down. Ali and other experienced poets give editorial support.

"I can endure imprisonment, but I can't live without writing poems."

Meanwhile, poet Maung Saungkha went to jail for six months for posting a [poem](#) on Facebook that claimed he had the President's face tattooed on his penis. He's been inspired by Myanmar poetry since he was 13 years old, particularly the work of Sayagyi Thakin Ko Taw Hmine, who rebelled against colonialism. It changed Maung Saungkha's own ideologies.

"In Myanmar, people are born into a society automatically impregnated by government propaganda, so it is typical to have Islamophobia," he says. Reading poems about the military regime inspired him to write his own. When he's especially moved by an incident or emotion, he writes a stanza on his smartphone.

In "Poet 23", Maung Saungkha writes: "Poet 23 strives for freedom; Never wears underwear; Hates dictators; Never listens to the parents." All in the same poem, he mentions Haruki Murakami, Jennifer Lopez and dictatorship. His playful tone is meant to provoke and denotes his distaste for

authority.

“I can endure imprisonment, but I can’t live without writing poems,” he says.

In 2018, he started Athan to stand up for freedom of art and expression. The organisation’s research raises awareness of the status of free expression in Myanmar to human rights defenders, civil society, NGOs and democratic communities. They also advocate that the Myanmar government amend the laws and mechanisms that obstruct freedom of expression.

If musicians and poets have the audacity to push the boundaries of their art, then they might have the power to change systems—or at the very least, connect them with other angry folks.

In the meantime, they do what they can to stay in the fight. While riding in a taxi with Kyaw Thu Win, he tells *New Naratif* about Rebel Riot’s UK tour, his obsession with kungfu movies and the 2015 student riots (in response to a new education bill, students demanded rights to form student unions and teaching in ethnic minority languages). He was heading to Aung San Stadium to drop off a package of Rebel paraphernalia for a customer in Shan State. Chuckling at his errand, he says, “Yes, I am also a slave to capitalism.”

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