

Myanmar's Students Sacrifice Books For Bullets in 'Fight For Future' Against Junta

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A growing number of children are leaving school and picking up arms out of desperation.

Security forces in Myanmar are targeting anti-junta youth activists throughout the country, forcing many to drop out of school and take up arms with militia groups seeking to unseat the military regime despite international laws prohibiting children from becoming soldiers, family members said Thursday.

Youth activists, many of whom say they felt hopeless about their future under military rule, began to join the widespread resistance movement against the junta after it seized power from Myanmar's democratically elected government in a Feb. 1 coup.

Many have been arrested or even killed in clashes with the military, prompting concern from observers who lament what they say is an increasingly lost generation of children forced to sacrifice their dreams in the hopes of reclaiming their country from an oppressive regime.

In the seven months since the coup, security forces have killed 1,058 civilians and arrested at least 6,343—mostly during crackdowns on anti-junta protesters—according to the Bangkok-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP).

The junta says it had to unseat Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD government, claiming the party engineered a landslide victory in Myanmar's November 2020 election through widespread voter fraud. It has yet to present evidence of its claims, though, and public unrest is at an all-time high.

Among the youth activists who have joined the fight against the military is 16-year-old Zaw Myo Mai Laban from the Kachin state capital Myitkyina, who went underground in June after around 50 soldiers and police officers tried to arrest him at his home for taking part in anti-junta protests.

"We know young students like us are not physically fit for fighting yet—we've only just passed childhood," the member of the Basic Education Students' Union Network (BESUN) of hundreds of students from more than 50 townships told RFA's Myanmar Service.

"However, we are doing this with the sole intention of fighting injustice and oppression. We give encouragement to one another when we find ourselves weak and try harder to be competent for the revolution."

Zaw Myo Mai Laban said that ethnic armed groups in the liberated areas of the country's remote border regions had initially refused to allow those under the age of 18 to attend military training, in accordance with international laws prohibiting the use of child soldiers, but eventually relented due to "the strong enthusiasm of the young students."

"It is true that I am underage according to international law and laws against child soldiers, but [the military is] killing people whether they are underage or not," he said.

"International law doesn't mean anything to the military."

'I would rather fight'

Despite the military's heavy-handed response to anti-junta protests, many high school students continue to take part in the gatherings, particularly in Myanmar's largest cities Yangon and Mandalay.

A student with BESUN in Mandalay, who spoke to RFA on condition of anonymity, said he participates in protests daily "for the future of the country's youth."

"We are more afraid of losing our future than we are of the military," he said.

"Education in Myanmar at present is completely in shambles. Conditions were just about to see some improvement when they staged this coup. All our hopes were dashed ... We had a spirit of revolution long before the coup, and their atrocities made us want to fight back even more."

"When your friends are killed, there is little you can do but grieve for them. I would rather fight for them instead," he said.

Most of the high school students now involved in the anti-junta movement are minors under parental guardianship. Many parents told RFA they are worried about their sons and daughters being arrested, maimed, or killed, although some have allowed their children to join the protests.

The mother of two high school students aged 15 and 17 in Yangon's South Okkalapa township said she accompanies her children to protests but has asked them not to join the armed uprising.

"I went along with them so they would not get into trouble or be harmed, because you can't stop them from joining the protests," she said.

"However, I asked them not to do anything like take up arms because they are not old enough. If they get arrested and sent to prison for taking part in the protests, at least I could go and see them. I may be selfish, but I cannot allow my young kids to join a revolution."

A student with the Launglon township branch of BESUN in Myanmar's Tanintharyi division, who also declined to be named, said he regularly speaks with parents as part of an effort to bring more youths into the anti-junta movement.

"If students don't get involved in politics, politics will work against them," he said.

"We enlightened [parents] by explaining that students have been detained and tortured too. This helped them understand why we have taken to the streets, and they allowed their sons and daughters to join us."

Investigating youth activists

Meanwhile, authorities have spared no effort in investigating high school students involved in anti-junta activities.

In Myanmar's Bago region, five high school students were arrested in the first week of September, including one who died in detention while being interrogated. According to AAPP, at least 23 school

age children were among those killed in the past seven months since the coup, while at least 20 high school students have been arrested.

An AAPP spokesman told RFA that school age children are still very much at risk from the military.

“If things continue like this, the children in our country will no longer have a future, including those who would one day be the nation’s leaders,” he said.

“Children must have the right to freedom of movement and to follow their dreams. They shouldn’t be living in fear. However, at present, they must be careful even of what they wear because of current restrictions. The loss of their future is a loss for the country.”

Calls by RFA to military spokesman Maj. Gen. Zaw Min Tun seeking comment went unanswered Thursday.

Reported by **RFA’s Myanmar Service**. Translated by **Khin Maung Nyane**. Written in English by **Joshua Lipes**.

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