

Burma

# Jailed Karen Chief Minister Has Long History of Standing Up to Myanmar's Military

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**Being unbowed, defiant and outspoken are trademarks of Nan Khin Htwe Myint, the detained Karen State chief minister of the ousted National League for Democracy government.**

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When the military staged a coup on Feb. 1, the 67-year-old was detained, like other NLD government officials. She told The Irrawaddy in February [1] that during her house arrest, the Karen woman challenged the commander who detained her, saying, "If the military thinks there is vote fraud, I am ready to contest with you via an open ballot system anytime, rather than a secret ballot." That was her response after the commander read her the regime's official notice announcing the coup, which said the military seized power due to electoral fraud. The commander responded with an uneasy laugh.

Even under house arrest, she urged the people to continue their anti-regime strike in whatever ways possible, whether by raising three-finger salutes—a symbol of defiance against military rule—banging on pots and pans, or joining the civil disobedience movement (CDM).

She herself engaged in all these different means of anti-regime protest. As she still had access to her phone, Nan Khin Htwe Myint gave interviews to the media, urging public support for "final efforts" to strike against the regime and to speak up for the release of detained leaders, including Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

She even posted a video online calling on people to unite to fight against military rule and urging soldiers to defend the people and unite with the general public.

On Feb. 8, two days after tens of thousands of Myanmar people took to the streets rejecting the military coup, she was taken to Hpa-an Prison [2] in the Karen State capital.

In May, she was sentenced to two years in prison for comments she made following the Feb. 1 coup calling for people to show unity in striking against the regime, which were deemed by the junta to be incitement.

Then on Nov. 9, the NLD Central Executive Committee member was sentenced to 75 years in prison [3] on four corruption charges—which she denied—by the junta court inside Hpa-an Prison.

She is now serving a total of 77 years in prison, a move by which the junta hopes to ensure that the core NLD member stays behind bars.



*Karen State Chief Minister Daw Nan Khin Htwe Myint, who has since been ousted by the coup, greets locals during a visit to Kamarmaung town for an NLD signpost-raising ceremony in early March 2020. / National League for Democracy-Kayin State*

Her family and people close to her say it shows the depth of the military's grudge against her for her outspokenness and defiance.

### **Dedicated democracy activist**

Nan Khin Htwe Myint has made many sacrifices due to her activism and family history of opposing military rule.

Her father was the Karen State head of the AFPFL (Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League) in the years shortly before and after independence from the British. Through family discussions Nan Khin Htwe Myint gained a homegrown knowledge of federalism, as well as political and ethnic history. Under Myanmar's military rulers, her family was targeted for persecution for their political ties.

She has inherited her father's commitment to working for ethnic rights and equality. She told The Irrawaddy in 2016 [\[4\]](#) that she "is dedicated to establishing my country as a federal-based democratic nation."

She was detained for the first time in 1975 for taking part in the student movement and imprisoned for six years. She continued to be imprisoned; she was jailed for two years in 1997, and then arbitrarily detained multiple times throughout the 1990s, without any charges.

She became a dedicated member of the NLD upon its formation in 1988, following the nationwide uprising that year. She contested and won a seat in the 1990 general election, in Hpa-an Constituency, the same constituency she represented in the 2015 and 2020 general elections.

The military regime's targeted acts of oppression against her include prison sentences and numerous arbitrary detentions. Now, she is being defamed by the junta with corruption charges. The allegation is ironic given that as chief minister of Karen State, Nan Khin Htwe Myint was known for her anti-graft stance.

"We are really surprised by the charges and the verdicts," said her younger brother Saw Than Htut, who won election to an Upper House constituency in the 2020 election.

"We, ourselves, loathe committing graft. She has never committed any corruption. The charges are a complete swindle," said the brother. "The junta's charges against her are totally based on grudges as she is a decisive, outspoken and courageous politician."

Those who know her well speak of her as leading a very simple and far from luxurious life, even though she was the chief minister. She didn't even own a car.

A senior NLD leader who has known her for more than 30 years, and who spoke on condition of anonymity, said she is loyal to both the party and the country and "a role-model" in the NLD after chairperson Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

### **Trumped-up charges**

After they were detained in prison in the second week of February, the regime filed complaints against Nan Khin Htwe Myint and U Than Naing, Karen State's municipal minister under the NLD government, accusing them of violating tender and financial regulations related to infrastructure development projects in Karen State. She was given 75 years while her colleague got a total of 92 years for corruption and sedition.

The pair told the court that they "didn't commit the offenses," according to their lawyer U Aung Thein.

A source close to the court said that "the rulings were unjust" because they were entirely based on the prosecutors' arguments, neglecting the defense lawyers' arguments. The judge just read out a prepared ruling, the source said.

Some lawyers said such cases could be solved through departmental inquiries and did not need to be brought to trial.

"These cases are simply based on grudges," said a lawyer who is familiar with the cases.

Knowing her integrity, a judge reportedly apologized to her during one proceeding, according to the source close to the court.

### **Junta's grudges against NLD**

Reflecting their desire for NLD members to stay behind bars, the Myanmar junta's grudges against the party's leaders become more obvious by the day. Nan Khin Htwe Myint's cases are just the latest examples.

Similar charges have been brought against other senior leaders including detained State Counselor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and other chief ministers.

The junta has filed 11 charges against Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the NLD party chairperson, including for sedition, alleged breach of COVID-19 restrictions, violating the Official Secrets Act and corruption, which are also widely believed to be trumped-up charges.

The 76-year-old Nobel Laureate faces up to 102 years in prison if found guilty.

In the 10 months since the military coup, the junta's courts across the nation have handed jail sentences to 286 people including NLD members, former lawmakers, students and civilians participating in the peaceful anti-regime movement, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which documents rights abuses and killings.

Civilian courts have sentenced them to terms ranging from at least two years to life imprisonment, while fewer than a dozen civilians have been sentenced to death by a military court.

Among them, 80-year-old NLD patron U Win Htein was sentenced to 20 years in prison for high treason by a court inside Naypyitaw Prison for criticizing the coup on Oct. 29.

Rakhine State Chief Minister U Nyi Pu was sentenced to two years in prison for incitement by Sittwe Court on Oct. 8. Magwe Region Chief Minister Dr. Aung Moe Nyo was sentenced to the same term on June 8. Mandalay Region Chief Minister Dr. Zaw Myint Maung, who is also the NLD's vice chair, is also accused of sedition and corruption, and awaits trial.

## **The Irrawaddy**

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### **P.S.**

- The Irrawaddy 19 November 2021:  
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/jailed-karen-chief-minister-has-long-history-of-standing-up-to-myanmars-military.html>

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### **Footnotes**

- [1] <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/many-myanmar-govt-ministers-nld-leaders-still-detained-coup.html>
- [2] <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-military-re-arrests-two-chief-ministers.html>
- [3] <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-gives-deposed-chief-minister-75-years-in-prison.html>
- [4] <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/inspiring-women-of-burma.html>