

Myanmar: Education vs. revolution: school reopenings bring hard choices

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When the Myanmar military reopened the nation's schools in November, millions of students found themselves forced to choose between maintaining the boycott of state services and losing even more of their education.

Although Ko Linn Thet Maung was physically present in the classroom, he was not at all interested in what his teacher was saying. While his parents are against the February coup, when schools reopened on November 1, they made the hard decision not to boycott the government education system that answers to the junta.

When the military attempted to reopen schools in June of 2021, Linn Thet Maung's parents were among the millions who pledged not to send their children to the junta-run schools, rallying behind the slogan "No need for a military slave education". But by November, they had changed their minds.

"I am about to turn eighteen," Linn Thet Maung told *Frontier* on November 28. "They don't want me to get older without any classroom education, because they are worried about my future."

Schools throughout Myanmar began their first round of closures when COVID-19 first spread through the country in March 2020. Though there were efforts to reopen schools, a large portion of Myanmar's students have not been attending in-person classes for the last 23 months. In addition to concerns over COVID-19, many students and teachers are also boycotting a public education system run by the State Administration Council.

Now in his final year of school, Linn Thet Maung is preparing to take his university entrance exams. A teenager who feels that he cannot refuse his parents' decision, he says his return to school has been traumatic.

"I feel so much guilt for going to the school while my friends are boycotting," he said. "They might think I've become one of those who support the junta killing people. When I run into my friends on the way to school, I want to stop existing."

His mother, Daw Win Thet, explained that they had not made the decision to send their only son back to school easily.

"I am also unhappy with the junta education, but we don't know how long we will wait for the revolution to succeed," she said. "We needed an urgent solution for our son, so we decided to send him back to class."

'Going to school has no benefits'

It's not just the students having to decide whether or not to go back to school - teachers are in a

similar predicament. Tens of thousands of teachers have joined the Civil Disobedience Movement and are currently on strike. In response, the SAC education ministry sacked more than 120,000 of the country's 451,506 basic education teachers in May 2021.

More than 270 education department employees who joined the CDM have been charged or sentenced for incitement under section 505A of the Penal Code, which carries a maximum prison sentence of three years, based on a review of state media announcements conducted by *Frontier*.

The SAC has been [trying to fill the vacancies](#) left by striking teachers. Temporary teachers who are paid a daily wage instead of being salaried were also used during the military-aligned Union Solidarity and Development Party government that was in office from 2011 to 2016, but the practice was discontinued under the National League for Democracy government.

Frontier could not confirm how many people have applied for the daily positions, but the teachers interviewed for this article said that many applicants are known military and USDP supporters, who aren't being asked to pass the usual tests.

A teacher in Danubyu Township, who asked not to use her name, told *Frontier* on January 6, "two of my neighbours became daily wage teachers when the SAC started hiring those. Both of them are people who support the military." She said that more than a dozen military supporters from her village have become teachers through this new hiring scheme.

Ko Myat Thu, the secretary of the Dawei Township Basic Education Students' Union and a representative of the Basic Education Student Unions Network [BESUN], which called for a boycott on the school reopenings in November, urged students to continue their education on their own as best they can.

"Young people who are actively involved in the revolution are focusing on it," he told *Frontier* on November 29. "If they cannot be involved in the revolution directly, they should try to improve their self-knowledge even though education has been suspended, and take some online courses to be ready for when education resumes."

BESUN called on students forced by their parents to go to school to resist the decision.

"If your parents are pressuring you, [push back] against it and explain to your parents that going to school has no benefits," he said. "I would like to urge basic education students not to be involved in the operations of the military council in any way."

But it's not that easy for some teens. Linn Thet Maung said that even though he refused to go to school at first, he can no longer resist because he understands where his parents are coming from.

"I already discussed with them why I don't want to attend the school and let them know how I feel guilty for it. But that feels so small compared to their concern for my future," he said.

Exam pressure

Myanmar has roughly nine million registered students, according to figures for the 2019-2020 academic year from the Ministry of Education. Student union leaders estimated that just 900,000, or 10 percent, of students opted to enroll during the June reopening.

In addition to the low turnout, the June reopening also proved short-lived, with the regime closing schools again on July 9 due to the third wave of COVID-19 devastating the country at the time. However, a few months later, despite some criticism that the third wave of the pandemic wasn't

over, the SAC announced that schools would reopen on November 1. This time, a significantly larger number of students seem to have returned to the classrooms.

On November 26, SAC spokesperson Zaw Min Tun announced at a press conference in Nay Pyi Taw that around half of all school aged children, 4.7 million, had enrolled for schools and 3.3 million were attending class.

When *Frontier* spoke to teachers from four schools in Ayeyarwady and Yangon regions, all of them said that about one third of students had returned - a much higher percentage than those who had come back to class in June.

Daw Thwel Thwel Oo, a high school teacher from Danubyu Township who asked that her real name not be published, said that about 400 out of more than 1,200 students have returned to the school where she is teaching.

"In June, about 300 students showed up," she said. "Now, more students are returning."

Ma Thanzin Cho, a 17-year-old student from North Dagon Township, said her parents have no intention of allowing her to miss taking the university entrance exam this year. When schools were closed, they paid top dollar to hire tutors to continue her education at home.

"Tuition fees are expensive. It is one of the reasons that they want me to take the exam. They also said we should not wait for another year, because it is not certain if the civilian government will hold exams again. They are not more committed to the revolution than they are to me, their daughter," she said.

Thanzin Cho said she understands her parents' concerns, but she also feels guilty for the students who have been killed by the military during the revolution.

"I am not afraid to take the exam because I have finished learning all the materials taught by my teachers," she said, "But I don't want to take it this year, because everyone will criticise and blame me for being someone who took the exam under the junta's system for the rest of my life."

While some students returned to their classrooms under pressure from their parents, others have returned of their own accord, predicting that this year's final exams will be easier than those that came before.

Ko Htet Wai Linn, a 19-year-old student from Danubyu Township, returned to the school in November although he had also boycotted the reopening in June, because his aunt convinced him that this year's exams would be easier to pass.

"I am a repeater who failed the exam in 2020. At first, I decided to leave the school completely and to work in the family business. But now my family is urging me to try this year. They say that even if I fail, there would be no loss," he said.

For students, the tenth-grade matriculation exam is the most important and difficult test of their lives, because the scores they receive on it will decide which university they will be able to enroll in and which majors they are allowed to pursue. But this year, Thwel Thwel Oo, the high school teacher, said that passing the exams may not be the struggle it once was.

"[The SAC] will make sure [that students] pass the exam," Thwel Thwel Oo said.

An executive member of the Myanmar Teachers' Federation, who asked that their name be withheld

for their own safety, said that they were not surprised at all by suggestions that this year's exams would be easier. They said that throughout Myanmar's history of dictators, from Ne Win to Than Shwe, this kind of education had been typical.

"The education system was the same under the [previous] dictatorship. They have never valued people's literacy, and they just always give the school education like easy-to-pass the exam to the students," the MTA member said.

When the NLD ruled the country, the ministry also changed the exam systems for Grade 4 and Grade 8, standardising them at the township, rather than school, level. But for this year, sources near the ministry told *Frontier* that Grade 4 and Grade 8 exams would be changed back into the school-level exam system, with questions being designed by the schools' own teachers, making it easier for teachers to design tests that they know their students can pass.

The MTF member said that all the progress made in recent years in improving the nation's education system had been ruined by the coup.

"It will be good for those who want to pass the exam easily," they said. "But in the long run, these children will face difficulties in the next grade. I don't want to say 'do not attend' to those who want to attend. But from an academic point of view, they did not actually accomplish the classes."

The MTF member urged parents not to take advantage of the opportunity offered by the military's eagerness to showcase its educational successes.

"I am a parent of two children as well," they said. "Parents come to think they should take the opportunity in front of them. But in reality, just because the children go to class, it doesn't mean they are learning. It is not a real way to show their love to their children."

'Students are facing a very difficult crisis'

The parallel civilian-led government, the National Unity Government, introduced its own form of home-based learning through Facebook, YouTube and Telegram channels in June as part of its interim education plan. The NUG's teaching guidelines are hosted on the [Myanmar Basic Education Home](#) Facebook page.

Speaking with Public Voice Television on November 19, NUG deputy education minister Ja Htoi Pan [said](#) that home-based learning was being done across more than 200 townships with the cooperation of township-based organisations and student unions.

"The students are facing a very difficult crisis," she said. "We all need to pay attention to them and have to provide education in various ways. For those who have the internet, we can teach them by using the internet. For those who don't have the internet, we have to provide teaching materials to them."

Additionally, the NUG education minister said that discussions are currently underway to hold its own university entrance exams for tenth grade students.

"There are parents who are worrying about their children, so they want to make a decision for their children's future," Ja Htoi Pan said. "So, we have a plan to hold exams for those to give them the best solution. We will discuss it with the parents and the student unions."

Ko Phyto Wai Aung, an educational activist and a member of the Basic Education General Strike Committee, said that the NUG should do more to make the public aware of their education plans.

“They should give information all the time on what they are doing and where, without mentioning all the details if they are worried about safety,” he said. “Now most parents don’t know about the activities of the MOE [Ministry of Education], so we cannot gain their interest as much as we should.”

Frontier attempted to contact the NUG’s education ministry to ask how many students are being served through these alternative services, but did not receive a response before publication.

The MTF member said that holding exams during a revolution was no easy task, saying that the economic, health and social crises were drawing people’s attention away from their children’s education.

“Home-schooling has a time limit and a technology limit,” they said. “The internet is blocked in some townships. Even if the internet is available, the public does not pay much attention to completing all the courses.”

While there are alternative education options like [ethnic schools](#) and [volunteer-powered schools](#), students’ access to these alternatives are haphazard.

Essential Skills for Youth, an organisation which provided skills training to young people before the coup and is now holding online classes for grade 10 students, is one of these educational alternatives.

“We have teachers who have joined the CDM already, because our group provided assistance to them after the coup,” the organisation’s 20-year-old founder, who is in hiding from the military, told *Frontier* on November 27. “We noticed that most of the students do not know what to do at this time. So, we decided to provide education, because we know we can handle it systematically.”

However, even with 14 instructors and 30 volunteers, ESY is currently only serving just over 70 students, though the founder said that he is planning to open classes for younger grades in the future.

BESUN representative Myat Thu said that self-education would be an essential foundation for the nation’s reconstruction.

“I salute the students and teachers boycotting the military’s slave education,” he said. “Self-reliance is best when no education is convenient. Read books to gain a lot of knowledge, and study current political science, laws, and federalism to be ready to build our country when our revolution succeeds.”

Grade 10 student Ko Pyae Phyo, who is boycotting the junta-controlled school system and is a student of the NUG’s home schooling programme, said that he is willing to wait until after the revolution is successful to take his exams and continue his formal education.

“We can keep learning through the teaching programmes on social platforms which are run by the NUG and other organisations,” he said, “I will not receive the education from the junta, because there is nothing to gain from it. It is an education that just produces slaves.”

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