

Silent strike empties streets in Myanmar on anniversary of coup

Wednesday 2 February 2022, by [KYAW Min Ye](#), [RATCLIFFE Rebecca](#) (Date first published: 1 February 2022).

Shops abandoned as public defies military threats and stays at home a year after ousting of government

Streets were deserted and shops abandoned across many of Myanmar's towns and cities on Monday, as the public defied threats by the military junta and stayed at home in a "silent strike" on the first anniversary of the country's coup.

Images posted on social media showed usually congested roads with no traffic and stores shuttered. In a photograph shared by Khit Thit Media, the usually busy Sule Pagoda road in downtown Yangon was completely empty. In Mandalay, the second largest city, a normally bustling market had virtually no customers.

Images posted online showed similar scenes across the country: from Myitkyina and Namati in Kachin, Myanmar's northernmost state, to Dawei and Myeik in Tanintharyi region in the south of the country.

The military, which has struggled to control widespread opposition to its rule, [had threatened](#) charges of sedition or terrorism against anyone who participated in the stay-at-home protest. Business owners had also been told their properties would be seized if they participated.

Some opened their stores but left them unattended to get around the threats. In one image shared widely on social media, a seller mockingly left a sign next to their food stall that said: "All menu items are available." Beside it, empty bowls were labelled "beans", "tofu" and "kale".

[The military ousted](#) the democratically elected government of Aung San Suu Kyi on 1 February 2021, and has inflicted deadly violence and terror in an attempt to crush opposition.

A 27-year-old resident in Yangon's Sanchaung township, who asked not to be named, said he had stayed at home, along with his family members and neighbours.

"I heard some voices around by lunchtime from the main road, with people singing a military anthem. They might be military supporters marching on the street to break the silent strike," he said.

He said he was afraid to go out even after the protest had ended. "I don't want to get into any trouble or get arrested," he said, adding that soldiers were patrolling.

Since the coup, more than 1,500 people have been killed, and at least 11,838 people have been arrested in military crackdowns, according to [the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners](#). Detainees have been subjected to torture and mistreatment, including beatings, gender-based violence and prolonged stress positions, according to [research by Human Rights Watch](#).

Despite the risk of further military violence, some activists held small rallies prior to the silent strike on Tuesday morning. Protesters, led by students, sprinkled the streets of Yangon with red paint, the colour associated with Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy. Activists shared images of the act on Facebook, writing: "Our blood is red and we will march towards our enemy."

In Mandalay, protesters marched in the morning, chanting: "Who dares to live on the opposite side of the people?"

Alongside peaceful protest movements, civilians, including many young people, have taken up arms and formed people's defence forces.

In Yangon several bombings thought to have been carried out by such groups were reported by local media on Monday. Another reportedly occurred at a police station in Myitkyina.

Armed resistance groups target the military with guerrilla attacks against military targets and key infrastructure. The military, in turn, has responded by launching airstrikes, burning villages, and blocking aid to civilians.

As of 27 December, about [320,900 people were internally displaced](#) across Myanmar, as a result of the crisis and escalating conflict, according to the United Nations. A further 340,000 people were already displaced before the coup.

A statement from the office of the UN secretary general, António Guterres, on Monday warned of "an intensification in violence, a deepening of the human rights and humanitarian crises and a rapid rise of poverty in Myanmar".

Before the anniversary of the coup, the US, Britain and Canada announced new, coordinated sanctions against Myanmar officials, including the attorney general, Thida Oo, the supreme court chief justice, Tun Tun Oo, and the anti-corruption commission chair, Tin Oo. The US said they were closely involved in the "politically motivated" prosecution of Aung San Suu Kyi. The ousted leader faces wide-ranging charges that have been widely criticised and faces spending the rest of her life in prison.

The measures were welcomed by Anna Roberts, the executive director of Burma Campaign UK, who said countries should impose sanctions on companies and individuals that were financing the military. However, Roberts added that the new sanctions needed to be introduced more quickly. "It is vital to maximise pressure now while the military are more vulnerable," she said.

Rights groups have also called for further measures to block the junta's access to foreign revenues from oil, gas, and other resources, and for the UN security council to pass a resolution instituting a global arms embargo on Myanmar, and which refers military atrocities to the international criminal court.

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