

Pictured: Journalists who fled military repression prepare a chicken to eat after washing in the jungle near the Thailand border.



## Starting at Zero as a Journalist in Thailand

Shwe Yee Oo

### Abstract

In this memoir, journalist Shwe Yee Oo describes how she joined the profession, resisted the 1 February 2021 military coup, and then fled to Karen State to work for a media organization based close to the Thailand border, right at the height of the COVID-19 Delta wave in August 2021. Shwe Ye Oo worked there for several months before making the illegal journey into Thailand, where she has lived and worked since. She finishes the memoir with her resolute conviction that the revolution against the military will succeed.

### Becoming a Journalist

I am a journalist and member of the resistance against the military dictatorship. This article is a short account of how I entered journalism, reported news through the coup, and fled to Thailand, where I found out firsthand what it means to start your life again from zero. Without a job or a place to stay, I snuck in over the border as a stateless and illegal person and was promptly robbed of all my money. Really starting at zero.

When I was young, I was afraid of everything and was shy to speak in front of others. I was the kid who just mumbled without making any sounds when the teacher called on me to talk in front of the class. Everybody around me was amazed when that shy little girl became a journalist. After I started in this trade, I slowly became more courageous. I learned that you needed to stand on the side of the truth and had to be brave to speak it.

I entered the journalism industry after my final year university exams. I saw an advertisement for an internship and applied. Two weeks later, I got my first job as a journalist at Kumudra Journal. Then, I attended a three-month training course

offered by the journal's publishing company. Senior editors taught me the basics, such as what news actually was, and what ethics to consider when becoming a junior journalist. I also learned a lot from Saya U Ye Naing Moe and Saya Kyaw Yin Myint, who both taught me things I had never even heard of. Spending just five minutes listening to them was invaluable. Sayar U Ye Naing Moe always used both local and international examples for comparison when explaining the value of journalism. Sayar Kyaw Yin Myint imparted valuable knowledge about people and story depiction. I have now had many mentors throughout my career, and I had opportunities to attend both local and international training courses, but these two original luminaries and journalism instructors left a lasting impression.

From that point on, I worked as a journalist and as an editor for journals, online news, newspapers, and for broadcasting departments where I covered news about ethnic groups, land disputes, and politics. There are so many things that stand out in my mind from my career as a journalist. As a girl, I only knew how to get to school and then back home again, but after I became a journalist, I was able to travel throughout the whole country and even to other countries to learn more about and further my profession.

Even so, my father was upset when I chose this career. He wanted me to take a break after university and attend practical computer and language classes. He did not want people to think that he and my mother were allowing their daughter work so young, as I was not even 18 at that time. I paid my respects to him in the form of my first salary package, and while he appreciated the gesture, he still was not very happy. He did not smile until my first article ran and took up half of the second page of Volume 1, Number 1 of the journal. My father always kept a composed face, but on that day, he was positively beaming. After that, my parents never objected to my chosen career. They were proud of me and my new freedom. It's not wrong to say that this motivated me to continue on this path.

In 2012, I got a job at the first exile media outlet to re-enter the country. My work experience development really started

from there. I had opportunities to write political news and travel to ethnic areas. I preferred writing about internally displaced people and others living in unstable and active conflict areas. I always tried to get to those kinds of places whenever I had the chance. I loved talking with these people and getting to know them.

In 2017, I switched careers from pure journalism to an international non-governmental organization (INGO) that focused on the development of journalism via the provision of journalism training. I regarded this as being as close as possible to the journalism industry without being directly in it. Although it was a different career, I continued to regard myself as a journalist because I was still in the same general field. I worked in the journalism development INGO sector up until April 2021, after the coup. All of us in the media sector lost our livelihoods as our ability to work freely was abolished and we were forced into hiding by the military.

## **Resisting the Military Coup**

I resisted the coup as a citizen against dictatorship by banging pots and pans every night as well as by protesting. My friends and I were part of the Myin Taw Tar protest in Thaketa Township when it was attacked by police and soldiers from the State Administration Council (SAC) on 19 March 2021. They shot young protesters on the road with both rubber and live bullets and threw tear gas. We dispersed and ran into nearby streets. The soldiers were not satisfied with this single act of violence and followed us into the nearby residential area and kept shooting, killing more people in the side streets. Some locals opened their doors and offered to shelter us. We hid there and went out when it was safe to continue protesting.

That night we gathered at a friend's house and talked well past the military's curfew time. We decided to spend the night there, and at 8 p.m., we banged the pots and pans as usual. After that, we hung out and watched the news. At around 10 p.m., the ward administrator for my friend's ward started banging on

doors and checking the household guest lists with soldiers. We were scared we could be detained. We thought frantically about how to escape if the soldiers came to check. We tried the back door, as well as the staircases. Fortunately, the soldiers did not come to where we were staying.

While I actively participated in protests myself, I also supported the media personnel bravely reporting from the streets every day by distributing safety kits to them. Later, when the protests died down and many young people went into the jungle to fight back against the military dictatorship, I contributed to the resistance by becoming a part-time remote editor for one of the media organizations that had relocated to the jungle. I also volunteered at a group assisting media workers and connecting those in need with useful organizations and people.

However, I was not satisfied with myself. I kept thinking I was doing nothing meaningful and that nothing would happen by just sitting in Yangon. Every day I thought about how long this coup would go on. I could not figure out an answer. From 1 February 2021 until now—October 2022—I have rarely had a good night's sleep. When I was in Yangon, I always had to get up and check whenever a car passed by our house to see if the SAC was coming to arrest me. Then I would be stuck awake until morning.

## **To Karen State**

At the end of July 2021, I finally decided to follow the many other young people who had fled to a liberated area (i.e., an area controlled by an ethnic armed organization), choosing to head to Karen State, where the media organization that I was working remotely for was based, with four of my colleagues. Our minds were made up to join the resistance against the dictatorship and work in the news. At that time, there were a lot of checkpoints on the way to Mon and Karen states. The thing I worried about most was my Citizenship Scrutiny Card (CSC) which I had hidden in my suitcase; on my CSC, my occupation is listed as 'journalist'. If you were a journalist, the military would arrest you without

question. For someone like me, whose CSC confirmed incontrovertibly that I was a journalist, the anxiety was unbearable.

I was paranoid about disclosing my profession, the career that I wholeheartedly love.

Our group of five finally arrived in Karen National Union (KNU) territory on 8 August 2021 at 6 p.m., when most of the country was celebrating the commemoration of '8888'. This was during the middle of the COVID-19 Delta variant wave that was devastating Myanmar, so we had to quarantine at a place arranged by the KNU, near the village of the media agency we were going to work at. Living there gave me new experiences and new skills. New life experiences, so to speak.

There were no other people in quarantine on the day we arrived. We unpacked our stuff and prepared for the two-week isolation period. The KNU provided each of us with a mosquito net, a blanket, a pillow, and a mat. Our accommodation was a frame, a concrete floor, a corrugated metal tin roof and blue tarpaulin sheet walls. There were three solar-powered light bulbs. All of us were from Yangon and, as new arrivals, we had yet to meet the people we were supposed to be working with. The conditions were totally different from the city; to be truthful, we were quite scared. We worried about the lights going out. We feared the millipedes and caterpillars that were crawling around on the floor. We were also scared of other people and the ghosts that we could not see.

We set up two of the mosquito nets, sat inside them, and kept each other awake all night by talking until dawn broke. After that first fearful day and night, we checked out our surroundings. From the back of our building we could see the Thauing Yin riverbank; here, I would sit and stare across to the other side. At that time, I had no idea that one day I would cross that river to illegally enter the country on the other side.

After acclimatizing to the environment and finishing our quarantine we finally joined the news agency. Its office and staff accommodation were in a single building. We were under the same roof as strangers and initiated new bonds. We reported news for the general population day in, day out, all while living

in the same house. We took turns cleaning. Access to water was a major issue as we were 20 people in the same house. In the mornings, we all had to line up to use the two toilets. We would go to the village well to bathe as a group. In summer, when the water in the well dried out, we just washed in the Thauung Yin river. For our village, the river was nature's swimming pool. We learned a lot from the other young people around us—all aged around 20 years old; individuals committed to achieving their goals in any possible way given the situation.

My colleagues and I all worked and cooked together as a group, but because everybody is an individual, sometimes we would still have disagreements and get mad at each other. Even so, we cared for each other and thought together about the light at the end of the tunnel. During the nights, we would have conversations and sing under the moonlight to keep homesickness at bay. We had everything we needed to suppress the feelings of homesickness. We supported each other through thick and thin.

In the modern online era, you can work and cover news from anywhere, but this is much easier said than done for journalists in the jungle—especially for broadcast news presenters. News presenters like us from Yangon were used to reporting from soundproof studios in fancy buildings. In the jungle, we were presenting the news from 'studios' and 'offices' with tin roofs, that were half brick, half tarpaulin. When we presented the news, we had to shout literally as loudly as possible to be heard over the cacophony of roosters crowing and dogs barking, not to mention the sounds of the rain in the rainy season. During afternoon news sessions we presented the news while drowning in our own sweat, enduring heat from the lights and the sun without air conditioning or fans.

During our time in Karen State, we met many artists, people in the Civil Disobedience Movement, and other young people who joined the armed resistance. I respected and admired these people, because although we were all living in hardship, I felt like I at least had a roof over my head and a computer to work on. I respect everyone who gave up their lives and jobs to come to the jungle, attend military training and sleep in a hammock.

We also met so many local people who looked after us very well. The smiles and encouragement from the honest and open Karen community made people like us—far away from home—feel inspired. Ah Naw from the shop at the edge of the village and Aunty Wah from the village *kway teow* noodle shop were our second mothers. We had their support and encouragement right up until the time we each left.

## **Crossing the River**

In the first week of March 2022, I decided to leave the village, and therefore, the job, for reasons I will not go into here. I came to Thailand illegally. I crossed the Thaung Yin river, and from the village on the other side of the river, traveled to a small town in Thailand, spending two nights on the road. I brought my kitten, whose name was Pho Choi. He became my companion when his first owners left the village. He was so frightened at that time, and I looked after him in the village media office. I managed to get a backpack, through networks in Thailand, to carry him in and practiced taking him around so he could be ready our travels. Unfortunately, Pho Choi disappeared on the road in Thailand. I did not have the chance to stay longer to find him again. Up until now, I still feel bad that I left him.

Once I arrived in Thailand proper, I was at a loss as to where to start. I had entered the country illegally. I had lost my own country. I was at a loss. A friend's family helped me by inviting me to stay with them for a month. I moved in, but then fate mocked me when a thief broke into my room and stole all of my money. My friend and host family felt bad for me, but we dared not call the police. I was worried that if we reported the stolen money, the authorities would find out that my friend was harboring me, an illegal immigrant. I did not want to cause any more trouble for them. I had been in Thailand for only two weeks when this happened.

I had to start my life again from zero. I applied for one job after another. Most employers did not dare hire a person



without any official documents. I looked for full-time jobs that would suit me while doing all the irregular part-time jobs I could find.

I experienced ups and downs and insecurity, and I thought constantly that coming to Thailand had been a mistake. A friend helped me find a psychotherapist to help me with my mental state. They also arranged for me to attend a mental health workshop. After that, I had four or five counselling sessions with a counselor. I reflected on what was happening in my mind, what I was fearful of and worried about, what I had accomplished, and what my capabilities were. I also met people who were in the same situation as I was. I talked to them and pulled myself back up, knowing that I was not alone. After that, I felt a bit more stable and managed to get a job in the Myanmar news industry again, after five months of joblessness.

However, depression, nightmares, and insecurity still affect most of us who left Myanmar.

Whenever I see Thailand police I have the thought that I am going to be arrested. This haunts me to this day even though I have been in Thailand for more than seven months. I do not want to go back to seeing a counselor. I feel bad for those who are in worse situations than mine. I have come to hate myself for being overly sensitive to every little thing and for becoming soft. I do not want to be content in this situation where I feel so much insecurity and do not know when I will be able to go home.

## **The Future**

If dreams come true, mine is to go home as soon as possible. I really want to get back home. However, we from Myanmar need to keep surviving and keep resisting before any of us can do that. One thing for sure is we all need to do what we can for the future of our country regardless of where we are. Everyone who does not want Myanmar to suffer under military rule is taking part in this resistance in any way they can.

The military did not put us in this situation by accident. They planned it. They are still repressing the people through

horrible and cruel methods. They are still killing people. Therefore, there should be no negotiation with this military. We need to continue pushing forward with this revolution. The military and its power are on the wane. The resistance will definitely win one day. Then, we will need time to rebuild the country. We will not have a brand-new country the day that the military falls. We will need to pick up every piece and fix everything that has been lost and destroyed, and we will need to do this together in a united way—just as we have been united against the military in this people's revolution.

I do not know how long this revolution will take, but we need to keep walking, keep striving, until the dictatorship falls.