DAGON UNIVERSITY

My Participation in the 1996 Student Movement

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Abstract

In this 2016 article, Lay Lay Mon reflects on her student activist experiences, her time in prison and her professional career. For Lay Lay Mon, activists from generations X, Y and Z fail to meet the high standards set by earlier generations of political activists. She outlines four differences between these activist generations and three of her core political objectives.

Introduction

I am 38 years old; I was born in Yangon in 1978 to parents who were very involved in politics. My father was a civil servant and my mother, whose family has a military background, was from Hsipaw Township, Northern Shan State. I have been in prison twice, for 12 years in total. The first time was from 1997 to 2005, and the second time was from 2007 to 2011. I started working in 2012 as a journalist. At the time of writing, in 2016, I work as a Senior Broadcast Journalist for the Democratic Voice of Burma.

I started to learn about politics in 1988 when I was in fifth grade. I had the opportunity to participate in the *Ah Ka Tha*, or Basic Education Student Union, and protested with the union at the Basic Education High School 2 (the Yarmakwin school), and with the Basic Education Middle School, Tamwe Township, which I attended. I learned about politics from practicing it, not by studying, and it was a wild experience.

In my view, learning about politics should begin with theory and move on to practice. This helps people become responsible citizens. But I myself never had the chance to learn about high level political theory. I grew up in Myanmar where human rights are not guaranteed, and I had to struggle to express my political views on the street.

When I was just a teenager I participated in the 1996 student demonstrations, leading a section with other older student leaders, who were applying their experiences from the previous 1988 uprising. On 9 December 1996, when I was studying the first year of my botany degree, I took part in a Dagon University student demonstration. At that time, I worked as a coordinator for the Dagon University Student Union (DUSU). In 1997, with the arrest of the *Da Ka Tha*, which is the Central Executive Committee of the DUSU, I was sentenced to 10 years in prison under section 5/J of the Emergency Act and section 17 of the 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Law, along with another 13 students. I was only 17 years and eight months old, and I was imprisoned for eight years in the Insein and Thayarwaddy prisons. I was finally released under an amnesty in 2005 after the dismissal of Intelligence Chief Khin Nyunt's faction from the ruling military regime. The title of the amnesty that freed me was "Free the Prisoners on Independence Day".

My Professional and Political Life

After being released from prison in January 2005, I continued to be involved in politics, following Min Ko Naing of the 1988 generation. I furthered my professional career by learning and working as a freelance translator and writer for Teen Magazine, with the help of Ma Thida (Sanchaung), who was one of my acquaintances in prison. I also took the chance to attend university, but not as a day student, as I was only accepted into a distance education university under a Myanmar language degree specialization. At 27 years old I was again a first-year student, though this time doing a distance education degree. At the same time, I studied media literacy and learned about journalism during English classes for former political prisoners at the American Center (AC). Following that, despite failing the intermediate level of 'English 5' at the AC, I was chosen to participate in high level courses on women's leadership at the British Council, which I started but never finished. That was my educational journey in the first two years after being freed from prison.

The 2007 Saffron Revolution happened while I was attending my second year of distance education. I was imprisoned again for 11 years for joining the revolution and following the banner of the 88 generation, led by Min Ko Naing. I was charged with article 6 (conspiracy and defamation of the state) of section 505(B). I was imprisoned for four years, moved around from prison to prison, from Insein, to Mandalay, and Shwebo, from which I was finally released in October 2011, after filing an appeal. I was 33 years old when I got out of prison the second time. When I finally completed my university education and received a bachelor's degree, I was 36 years old. I did not attend the graduation ceremony. At that time, I was working for an international media organization.

Notes on Student Politics and Different Generations

Students do not come from the gutter. We are peacocks from the campuses, we are fighting peacocks. Every student generation should pass on the thoughts of their own student generation to the next. If I have the opportunity to discuss my longstanding political objectives, let me use the terms of hope, vision and representativeness.

Hope: I want to see the next generation of students evolve from students into political actors in a more systematic way.

Vision: My vision is the next generation of students learning how to negotiate through political dialogue and to advance democracy in our society for future generations.

Representativeness: The act of representing others in student politics needs to change according to the political system, the timeline, the conditions, the scope and the structure of the student politic.

Regarding hope, I strongly recommend the work and thought of U Nu. Highly qualified politicians and national leaders were

originally youths and students before they achieved their senior positions in education and politics, for instance, U Nu and General Aung San. U Nu writes about how to guide the next generation based on his work as a student and a political leader. His writing on 'students and politics' is worth reading for generation X and Y students to understand U Nu's political legacy. U Nu and his generation experienced World War II.

Another book I recommend is *Lat Thi Bone Thakin Ba Tin*,[1] which was written by Thakin Ba Tin. This book is about Ireland and Burma, both of which have strong patriotic spirits. The colonizers, the British, respected, recognized, and admired these two countries, even though the British were the rulers of "the empire on which the sun never sets". Thakin Ba Tin points out that the British struggled to occupy both nations, which were nationalistic until they gained independence. As a member of generation X, I admire the generations that struggled during independence and view them as worthy of respect in terms of Myanmar politics. They knew about the world without TV, smartphones, and computers. To compete in the world, they had to be highly advanced regarding political and personal qualities, they had instinctual awareness and knowledge, and can be referred to as a strong model generation. The preceding generations were strong model generations who achieved Burma's independence, even though most of the people born during World War II had very troubled lives.

For Myanmar, people born between 1960 and the early 1980s are known as generation X, and those born between the early 1980s and 1994 belong to generation Y, but there is no precise data or agreement on labeling these generations. Generation Z, born after 1995, cannot survive in the world without the help of modern technology such as computers, phones, and so on. The majority of the self-concept theories that generation Z people imitate come from the previous generation, so we can refer to them as the 'empty generation'.

[1] ဗတင်၊ သခင် (လက်သီးပုန်း-)။ ၁၉၆၈။

People from the older generations struggled in terms of politics even under the 'Bamboo Curtain' policy of the military regime. Similarly, in terms of armed revolution and protest demonstrations, no generation has produced new political or revolutionary ideas from 1960 to the present. Instead they replicate those of the older generations. As a result, it is possible to argue that generation Z, the empty generation, has been destined to be brainwashed since the days of the Burma Socialist Programme Party. It has been very rare for high-level Burmese politicians to emerge as leaders who could broadly speak out and proclaim civil rights and human rights in the same way as truly global leaders like Dr. Martin Luther King and John F. Kennedy.

These points can be considered both conventional and acceptable today, in Myanmar's contemporary situation. We cannot build a new democratic society because this country has a tradition of locking up student activists. When given the choice of "confrontation or compromise", most of our political leaders prefer confrontation. We do not have a habit of negotiation, which leads to pressure, threats, and coercion, and we have not had the chance to thrive in a civilized society.

We cannot create a new society using this approach. We only replicate the same revolution of the previous generation in our modern time. Thus, we cannot have a new generation with an open mind for the future. Note that replicating and imitating are different. By replicating, you lack your own individuality; it is like stealing, and limits creativity. Imitation on the other hand is the approach of 'collect, imitate, act'. You feed your own political thoughts first, and then imitate the ideas relevant to you. Because of replicating, this new generation is becoming a generation of emptiness, the zero generation: a generation that is replicating the older generation and choosing only confrontation as its form of revolution.

For this reason, we have to back away from replicating when it comes to the ideas of representation and representativeness. We have to aim for a new way of thinking, based on what the current political reality is, and we need to change our student

movement and behaviors. If we are only basing our activities on previous experiences, in practice, our actions will become harsher, and the result will not be smooth. It does not result in a win-win situation.

If we study social theory on the other hand, we can transition our experience smoothly and achieve a good result. Based on my experience, I think it will give us a good, dignified stance. When we present a new idea, we steam upstream using our revolutionary thinking as the engine. So, this is revolutionary. That is the key point. If I knew the theory well enough back then, I would have chosen a gentler approach. I do not like being put in prison.

In order to build a democratic society, we need more democratic leaders produced by civilian education institutions. Learning how to transition from study to politics will sew good political seeds for the future. This is my analysis of my current generation and of future generations. My perspective is held out of personal and historical respect for the previous generations. It is not based on ideology.

The previous student generations that came before are different from my own generation in four strong ways. The first is that they are like teachers with strong minds like whetstones, capable of sharpening and passing on their revolution, their ideas, and their ideologies to the next generation. They look at the new generation as a clay figure that can be molded and carved, and they are willing to offer their brains and ideas to the younger generation.

Second, they have honed their perception and conviction. They struggle on their own. They have strong visions and clear ideologies.

Third, they are able to choose paths to survive. They devoted themselves to things that reproduced politics, such as literature, novels, poems, translations, education. It is called going underground. They were able to see the world without technology like computers and cellphones. Since they had strong enthusiasm and a long-term survival path in politics, it is hard not to respect them.

Fourth, they were ready to give all they have learned to the new generations. They lacked prejudice toward the new generations.

Even in an oppressive political system that tortured them, they were able to pass down seeds to grow and flourish in the next generation. One of their weak points is that they could not share with us the legacy of "unity". They mixed problems with the revolution. Some older generations are stuck in an old system and cannot strike out with new ideas. This is partly due to political fatigue. They became political pensioners, their emotions leading to anger; they attempt to divide others and feel alienated.

My generation lives as deviants instead of living like young leaders. There are many opportunists. Instead of having their own character, people continue to replicate those of the older generation. They seem to put these older people first, but they still want to be shoulder to shoulder with them. We do not have minds like whetstones. We lack strong convictions and high ambitions.

Most of my own generation follow wrong paths, such as playing games, using drugs, replicating others, and living as opportunists. Instead of giving it their all, they are reluctant to share and even have the habit of giving misleading messages. My generation cannot move forward without technology. They claim their own ideas, ideologies, and theories, but they are merely replicating the older ideas with the support of technology. Their ideas expand only a little with the support of technology.

But one good thing about this generation is that instead of creating problems, they tend to look for unity, solutions, and peace more than the previous generation.

References

ဗတင်၊ သခင် (လက်သီးပုန်း-)၊ (၁၉၆၈)၊ *လက်သီးပုန်း*၊ စာပန်းချီတိုက်။