



Opportunities and Challenges for Student Unions

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Abstract

Written in 2016, this article discusses the opportunities and challenges for student unions at a time of political change, focusing on the ongoing (re-)institutionalization of the All Burma Federation of Student Unions and the tension between this process and the longer-term, repressive political context that encouraged the continuation of underground organizing. Tensions also existed between proxy organizations formed by school authorities and legitimate student unions.

Introduction

This article is based on my presentation at the “Student Activism in Burma: Inspirations, Aspirations and Representation” workshop organized by the Myanmar Institute for Democracy on 19 November 2016. Before my own speech, reputable student leaders from different student union generations presented on issues related to student unions and their historically valuable activities. These included U Hla Shwe, Dr. Min Thein, U Tin Aye Kyu, Ko Thet Tun, Ko Sai Kyaw Nyunt, Ma Lay Lay Mon, and Ko Zayah Oo. The successful event included question and answer sessions and allowed active members from their respective student unions to enthusiastically discuss the on-the-ground experiences shared by representatives of different generations.

I have always believed that with its strong spirit and glorious experiences, with its pure and indestructible soul, the All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) will embrace every one of our comrades from different generations and exist for many years to come.

This article continues in eight parts. The first four sections concern internal affairs which are related directly to the student unions:

1. Representativeness of student unions within campuses.
2. Systematic planning and delegation of an institutionalized organization.
3. Trust-building among student union members.
4. Unity.

The next four concern the external challenges that student unions encounter:

5. Different political contexts over time.
6. The popularity of the ABFSU.
7. The status and legitimacy of the ABFSU.
8. Attitudes of authorities toward student unions.

When going through these eight points it becomes clear that they are interrelated.

Representativeness of Student Unions Within Campuses

We have been repeatedly questioned by different stakeholders whether current student unions can genuinely represent the students within their respective campuses. In a country where different military regimes have ruled by fear and systematically oppressed and crushed apart student unions, many students were forcibly isolated from unions, student leaders, political movements, and student activities from late 1962 until 2015 when civilian leaders won that year's general elections and formed government. Specific fears were relayed not only by students themselves but also by lecturers, professors, rectors, and staff in the education sector. Aside from these, due to being systematically wiped from history, and because of university authorities' strict control of free campaigning, organizing, and movement within campuses, the ABFSU has been separated from students and considered a harmful institution. Thus, the

organization's campaigning works within campus have been weakened.

Systematic Planning and Delegation of an Institutionalized Organization

I find many organizations in our country to be weak in setting out rules and regulations related to accountability and responsibility and strictly complying with preexistent rules. In other words, although specific duties were assigned according to applicable organizational structures, there has been no systematic planning and delegation of institutionalized organization in many of today's student unions. The unsystematic working patterns of the ABFSU, with its members who are familiar mostly with working only underground, will negatively impact its organization, operations and mutual understanding among members, and provoke derivative and repeating problems in the long run. Therefore, members must get familiar with organizational meetings, consultation workshops, and delegations before and after working hours, excepting confidential information. While striving to solve complexities within the organization, movements will be delayed, and hence, time, money, and valuable energy could be lost in vain due to endlessly recurring problems. Therefore, if we can immediately solve the institutionalization problem, which is the primary cause, our comrades will be able to get rid of the problems mentioned above and develop a more prosperous and relevant ABFSU.

Trust-building Among Student Union Members

Trust-building issues among members can be resolved once the ABFSU is well established as an institutionalized organization. Endless conflicts will arise among student union members due to loosely planned actions if the organization is only occupied by cult followers and opportunists rather than those who joined after thoroughly understanding the policies which have already existed. Therefore, students, especially student union members,

should be clear about the needs of the ABFSU, the policies to be set out, and tactics to be applied.

When the 2007 ABFSU was formed as an underground organization by book club members and went on to carry out movements, there were no mobile phones or communication devices and very poor internet access. However, few trust issues arose among members because we could build trust and coordinate smoothly among our comrades. As we all understood during those days that we could be arrested once any secret information was revealed, we minimized the number of members as much as we could. Although there are still security concerns in 2016, we are now able to organize and perform our activities freely to a certain extent, and therefore, we no longer need to minimize our members. Because too much secrecy within the organization would amplify trust issues, it is essential that the ABFSU delegate specific tasks according to an organizational structure already agreed to by all members, and that there is transparency within the organization, at least to an extent.

Unity

When we talk about unity among the student unions, many would agree that this implies “conferences”. Since the early days, student union members have discussed rules and regulations, elections, and activities at conferences. We would like to maintain these good practices; the ABFSU and other student unions currently face existential challenges such as dissension and weaknesses in campaigning. Speaking of “unity”, it is essential not to lack specific policies. The existence of a unity based only on individuals, rather than on policies, will face difficulties in the long run.

Reforming the institutionalization of the organization is also essential. Unity attained through effective negotiation based on policy can only portray a successful congress rather than deliver it. A conference with new generation student union members who are unfamiliar with the culture of an organizing congress would be flawed. However, suppose we can show the

spirit of the student union and the strength of unity by reuniting the power of students with carefully planned strategies. In that case, I am sure that student unions will be able to open a new page in history.

Different Political Contexts Over Time

The years before 1962, when the organization could stand officially within campuses, was the golden age of the ABFSU. However, confrontation after the 7 July 1962 events, which turned to political repression; student movements within 1974-76 (even though these were not entirely maneuvers of the student union); the rebirth of the ABFSU among students and civilians during the 1988 revolution; student movements in 1996-98 attempting to organize the ABFSU and demand political freedom; the organization of the ABFSU just before the Saffron Revolution in 2007; and the attempt to reform the ABFSU in 2013, were all activities carried out mostly underground. Movement strategies and the means of communication of university student unions, ethnic minority student unions, township and district level student unions, basic education student unions, as well as today's ABFSU, in its current institutional form since 2012, are mixed with secrets and non-institutional structures and their organizational structures are not announced publicly. This is due to the country's political instability.

Myanmar's political context is one where it is difficult to trust authorities in good faith and this has an enormous impact on politically active organizations like student unions. Although this new transition period could be an opportunity for student unions, it could become trickier at any time. Under the rules of previous military regimes, underground organization and movement systems were most appropriate, since union members faced arrest. In January 2012, the ABFSU Central Organizing Committee, along with official organizational delegations, was formed by our 2007/2008 ABFSU members in collaboration with the members from 2003. Although there were many forms of threats and impediments under the rule of the nominally

civilian government from 2011-2015 (still a partially military government), there were no arrests made on the basis of organizing student unions.

Impediments remained, including the twenty-four-hour arbitrary detention of at least a dozen student union members from different parts of the country before 1987's 25th Anniversary of the 7 July 1962 protest against the military coup, and the imprisonment of hundreds of student union members who protested against the National Education Law in 2014-15 and their supporters. Although the organizational structure of the ABFSU was announced publicly because of these situations, some parts were still kept secret to prevent security breaches and unnecessary exposure. Even though the National League for Democracy (NLD) government took power in 2015, today in 2016 the ABFSU is still the most prominent enemy of the Ministry of Home Affairs, according to a Union Minister of Security and Border Affairs report to the Magway Regional Parliament, which depicted student movements as transgressive. During the present moment, when there is much political awakening and the return of many political movements, and transparency is believed to be improving in politics, at least to some extent, the ABFSU movement needs to be more widespread among students and the general public and should spread according to advocacy strategies. However, we still need to take extra precautions against security breaches since nothing can be taken for granted during this period. Since we are currently in the middle of a transition period, we must take our part in writing the student union history's while continuously analyzing the changes in prevailing political dynamics.

The Popularity of the ABFSU

As a result of being systematically written out of history by different military regimes, the phrase "student union representative" was replaced with "student representative" in amendments to the National Education Law in parliament. This meant the prestigious ABFSU was degraded to just one of many student

welfare organizations. It is a tragedy that ABFSU is perceived by many as an ordinary student organization that engages in political activities both inside and outside the student community. The popularity of ABFSU increased after it stood with workers and farmers in fighting for their rights, as well as for leading the education protest movements in 2014 and 2015. However, after the new government took over in 2015, the ABFSU has become like an abandoned organization due to negative propaganda by government lobbyists against the union, the inability to implement activities due to problems the union alone cannot solve, and conflicts and dissension within the organization. In order for the ABFSU, once a prestigious organization in history, to be able to return with its five key policies, it is essential that it stay close to the general public and not be isolated from the student community. It is crucial to keep in mind that the organization cannot be called a student union if it is separated from the students.

The Status and Legitimacy of the ABFSU

After 1962, the establishment and movements of student unions were targeted, prosecuted, and considered by the military junta to be political transgressions, right up until the 2007 ABFSU. Although no one has been detained for establishing a new student union since 2012, there are still threats, investigations, and misdirection in different ways by university authorities and government institutions (e.g., military intelligence under the Ministry of Home Affairs). Therefore, students who participated in the democracy education protests in different parts of the country in 2014 and 2015 demanded to acknowledge the legitimacy of student unions in National Education Law. The amended law enacts rights to organize the student unions under respective charters of universities. However, university acts were being drafted without any transparency. It indicates that the legitimate status of the existing student unions is not guaranteed by the regulations. An important fact is that the lack of recognition of current student unions in the original law gives fearful

bureaucratic university authorities absolute power to control the unions. The present student unions exist in the same way as other student organizations even though they do not have any legitimate status. Student unions that are not legally recognized either must carry out their establishment, campaigning, and activities within narrow boundaries verbally set by university authorities, or end up facing objections. Another huge challenge for the ABFSU is the emergence of proxy student organizations, which were formed by university authorities to substitute for unions. Even though organizations with unrepresentative origins usually do not last long, we need to be cautious about these since they are intended to detach students from the union and blemish the student unions' importance in history.

Attitudes of Authorities Toward Student Unions

Since different military regimes have successively treated student unions as a prominent enemy, antagonistic narratives are deeply rooted in government institutions. By closely monitoring student union leaders and their activities like criminal gangs, and portraying student union members as rebellions or radicals, authorities can harm student unions at any time. The NLD government cannot save student unions from the predation of the Ministry of Home Affairs, since they are also trapped within the 2008 Constitution. Moreover, they also failed to legally recognize the legitimate status of the ABFSU. Therefore, there have been clashes between the ABFSU and lower-level administrative bureaucrats overwhelmed by fear and with weak political awareness. Hence, university authorities, ward administrators, and police intelligence consecutively committed legal prosecutions.

Conclusion

The discussion above is only my opinion. While I barely suggest solutions to overcome the challenges presented, I firmly believe that solutions able to work on the actual ground will emerge only if our new generations face these current issues and future challenges. History will determine whether these solutions are right or wrong. Therefore, I welcome the new steps of our younger generations, who are honest and brave and in whom we put our trust. In order to move forward with the confidence of our elder generations, the most important thing is to overcome all challenges by ourselves, since the future is now in the hands of a new generation.