



From Student Activism to Peace Negotiation: A Life Story of Trying to Build a Democratic Union

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Abstract

Intended to contribute to the building of a democratic union in Myanmar, this autobiographical article follows the life of Sai Kyaw Nyunt, from his admission to the Yangon Institute of Technology in 1995 to becoming secretary of the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee in 2016, the year the article was written. After getting involved in student politics, Sai Kyaw Nyunt was persecuted and imprisoned in 1998. He met political prisoners across various prisons and was released in 2002. After starting a business career, Sai Kyaw Nyunt then became a founding director of the Myanmar Institute of Democracy, before leaving to join the Shan National League for Democracy. He participated as a secretary in the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee and helped convene the 21st Century Panglong Conference.

Introduction

In the Union, if one kyat is given to Bama, so must Shan and Kadu be given one kyat each!

A Lisu self-administered zone must be established.

Shanni State must be established.

(We want) the development of a Pa-O national state.

(We want) the development of a Palaung state.

We Akha people want our own self-administered zone in federal democratic system with representation granted in the union, state and regional-level legislative and executive bodies to protect the rights of our people.

Wa State is willing to discuss a policy for building a new union. Self-administered zones must have self-autonomy over the state and shall have equal executive power to Bama ethnic people at the national level.

The new federal union should not be called the 'Federal Union of Myanmar'. Naming the nation either in Burmese or English as 'Burma' or 'Myanmar' will reinforce a notion that it only refers to the Bama nationals, which is just one of the ethnic people inhabiting the territory of what is now the union. Therefore, a new name for the union must be determined to guarantee equality for all the different people inside the country and to build a federal union.

All armed forces must remain under the control and governance of the civilian government.

We must amend or rewrite the 2008 Constitution.

We must build a democratic federal union!

A review of the 2008 Constitution should be approached ensuring union solidarity is not undermined, and amendments should be made to accord with laws guaranteeing sharing the three powers of the nation.

We, the Tatmadaw, present our strong opinion for each organization to accomplish their political desires strictly under and on the basis of the 2008 Constitution.

The 2008 Constitution, which was autocratically enacted against the people's will by the State Peace and Development Council, is difficult to amend and only complicates ethnic people's affairs. Moreover, in a situation where the 2008 Constitution grants the military a wide range of powers and privileges, and the military is protecting the Constitution, the armed forces greatly influence efforts for equality and self-determination by ethnic people.

The root cause of armed conflict with and between ethnic people is the failure to implement the commitments in the Panglong Agreement, and lack of opportunity to resolve the political conflict by political means.

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These are just a few of the statements made during the 21st Century Panglong Conference from 31 August to 4 September 2016, which was broadcast nationwide. The conference was meant to progress the resolution of Myanmar's nearly 70-year-long internal conflicts and solve issues related to the demands of minority groups, such as the Akha and Lisu, to have their own self-administered zones; the demands of other groups, including the Pa-O, Palaung, and Shanni, to be able to have their own states; general requests for minority rights to be protected; the continuous usage of the term 'state' to refer to mere 'self-administered zones'; issues of national equality and self-determination; discussions and recommendations to amend the 2008 Constitution; and protective standpoints on the 2008 Constitution, etc.

These quotes are excerpted from my own discussions as a member of the Union Peace Dialogue Joint Committee (UPDJC) secretariat, which was responsible for the successful convention of the 21st Century Panglong Conference. Let me recount some of the story of how I came to be involved in this conference, which was aimed at negotiating for internal peace and resolving political conflict.

Life as a Yangon Institute of Technology Student

1995 November. A Lashio native from Shan State got off the bus at the Burma Pharmaceutical Industry bus stop and stepped into the compound of the Yangon Institute of Technology (YIT). I felt small and inferior as I approached the 18 poles of the portico of the main auditorium. The school is so grand and glorious, quite intimidating. I murmured to myself, "I have finally become a student of YIT".

YIT is one of the most renowned universities among students in Myanmar. An institution filled with the best and the brightest students. It has been known by many names: a ‘rebellious school’ because it gave rise to anti-military dictatorship students, politicians, and activists, and ‘the blood-red school’ and the ‘red school’ because of its students’ bravery. Little did I know then that it stood up to its name.

My first year was completed without many challenges. I was one of those students who got called by the registrars and lecturers and given warnings, as I used to walk across Awbar Street, which was strictly prohibited due to its potential for students grouping together. And I was one of those students who kept their hair long. I was given the nickname ‘Clinton’ in place of my original name. I was always hyperactive and present at the top of the line whenever there was a gathering or meeting.

At around 9 p.m. on 19 October 1996, when I was in second year, the police beat and kicked YIT students with their military boots at the Sawbwargyikone Highway bus stop. In response students from each Yangon college, including YIT, protested at the roundabout in Hledan, at the junction point of Kamaryut Township; and at the Yangon University compound, calling for:

1. The arrest of the municipal police who unlawfully attacked and beat the students;
2. The perpetrators to appear before the students and officially apologize for their actions;
3. The arrest of the persons behind the incident who gave the orders; and
4. The publication of accurate facts of the incident in newspapers and radio.

The responsible officials not only did not take any action in response to the students’ requests but responded to the protests by sending the students back to their families, and special branch intelligence officers frequently called students into the registrar’s office to interrogate them. This demonstration was my introductory experience to a movement against the military

dictatorship. This particular movement was like trying to break a brick wall by banging your head against it. Since it was my first experience, I was merely a follower, fervently following the leadership of other student leaders.

At the end of November 1996, a letter was sent to the families of each student leader who participated in the movement. The letter read:

All people love students. University students are seen as the hope for our country's future. But now, people have to run and hide when they see students. Why? Students hitch a ride on the bus without paying fares just because they are students; fight with the bus crew; then fight with the waiter at the restaurant at late hours—they try to portray these situations as ones of unfair treatment and discrimination against students, causing incitement. They then inflate the issue and cause unrest. Use your common sense: is fighting with the bus crew, restaurant waiter, and municipal worker good and relevant for the reputation and honor of the students? People want to live and do business peacefully these days. Causing unrest is a problem for governance and power. Students should no longer be used for political reasons. Politicians are taking advantage of and using students.

- From the students who want to pursue education peacefully.

Starting at 9:30 a.m., 2 December 1996, students gathered at the 18-pole portico of the main auditorium of YIT and protested again, calling on authorities:

1. To identify and take action against those who wrote and sent the derogatory and divisive letters;
2. To not expel the student leaders;

3. To not shut down the school since it is not a political affair; and
4. To publish the true facts of the incident in newspapers and broadcast them on the radio, and to officially apologize to the students.

These four points were in addition to the overall demand for the authorities to come and negotiate with the students. The authorities only agreed to two of the requests: not to expel the student leaders and not to shut down the school. The rest of the students agreed to one student leader's proposal to go out and try to gain assistance from the public, so the students finally took the demonstrations onto the roads.

The student group gathered with propriety and made a line from the entrance of YIT to Hledan junction, walking and demonstrating. At the Hledan crossroad, the group met and joined other students from Regional College 2 of Yangon Main University. As evening came, speeches extended beyond students' rights and included statements from the All Burma Federation of Student Unions, and chants about human rights, government corruption, the suffering of the general public, the oppression meted out by the military regime, and general anti-military chants.

The mass of protesters marched from the Hledan crossroad point towards downtown along Hledan road, then across Strand road in Kyimyindaing Township. They passed Mahabandoola road, Theingyi Market, Sule Pagoda, and then on to the previous site of the American Embassy, to Yangon Central Railway Station, and Pansodan Road; and continuing from there, they planned to establish a protest camp at the Shwedagon Pagoda. However, the authorities planted some imposters to influence the route of the protesters so that they crossed the military command office on Signal Pagoda Road and went along U Htaung Bo Road. Protesting students and civilians were then blocked in by security forces from the front and the rear, just in front of the religious hall donated by the police force, between the U Htaung Bo roundabout and Shwedagon Pagoda. Although the students

were well aware of the troubling situation, they remained calm and began to sing the songs of the Student Union, planning to face whatever was coming next, to the end. The students then prayed, paid homage to the pagoda, and prepared for the worst.

The security forces showed a letter to the diplomatic cars which had accompanied the students throughout the march and the cars began departing the area, leaving the students at the mercy of the soldiers. Soon after the cars left, authorities began cracking down on the demonstrators, hitting them with batons. The protesters were then forced into security vehicles, including many injured people, and women, according to student leaders. They were taken to the Kyaikkasan field, and the military's special intelligence began interrogating them individually. In response, students from other universities began preparing to march onto the streets to protest if the arrested students were not released. As a result, at around noon on 3 December, professors, and the heads of the departments from each corresponding university, were allowed to come and take the detained students back to their universities.

On 6 December 1996, YIT students took to the streets again to protest despite a ban on protesting put in place by their teachers. They were stopped by security forces at the Thamine junction point and had to retreat to the university. I was there, holding a peacock flag at the frontline. The students then discussed secretly regathering again at Hledan and left the university compound, employing their tactics. Students from different institutions gathered at Hledan junction and began the mass protests. At around 3 a.m. the following day, the students were dispersed by water cannon. The security forces unlawfully destroyed and broke the windows of nearby shops, cafes, and vehicles. Some students were detained.

United mass demonstration by students from different universities intensified, and so did general political awareness. A month later, from 9-11 January 1997, the students' movement spread to more schools and colleges, including the Government Technological Institute (GTI) in Insein Township, the University of Medicine, and Dagon University, followed by protests in

Mandalay, Mawlamyine, and Sittwe townships. The military government responded by closing down all universities ‘indefinitely’.

As it turned out, the universities were allowed to reopen again in 1998. However, they did not practice the full academic year. YIT students had to attend classes in shifting groups. First, the final-year students of all different majors were allowed to attend classes for only two weeks and had to sit through qualification exams for reentrance the following year. As final-year students would be graduating after the exams, they were hesitant to protest or make any ripples. Similar attendance, testing, and exam regulations were also applied to fourth and fifth year students. Again, there were no protests whatsoever. Following that, the authorities finally announced universities could allow a month-long learning period for first, second, and third-year students before taking their exams. Students from different townships across the country started flooding in to attend classes.

At that time, engineering-related teaching and learning materials sent by international donors were rerouted from YIT to the Defense Service Technological Academy. First, second and third-year students then informed the professor that they did not accept the current ‘two weeks/one month-long class opening’ program, demanded a full academic term for learning, and requested that the Science and Technology Minister come and resolve the issue.

When the Minister, U Thaug, came to explain, I, personally, debated him face-to-face. Seeing my appearance, it was not hard for the informers at the university, who were reporting to military special intelligence, to recognize me—I wore a t-shirt imprinted with the United Nations (UN) emblem and the flags of UN member countries; had long hair; and was notorious for my nicknames “Shan Gyi” and “Clinton”. Students were not satisfied with the minister’s resolution and began protesting. This time, the students had no opportunity to take to the streets as they were already surrounded on all sides.

Twenty-eight students, including me, were not allowed to sit for the exams at the university; we had to take the exam at Insein's GTI instead, under the watch of our parents and guardians. One month after the exam, police and intelligence forces arrived at the private hostel I was staying at, and said, "Brother, we have a few questions". I was detained and taken away. The night was the full moon day of Tazaungmone, 3 November 1998. I was eventually taken to Insein special prison and processed with no right of defense or power of attorney; an ad-hoc tribunal was formed beside Insein Prison to try people like me.

Other student and political movements occurred soon after the YIT student protests in 1998. Different movements and underground activities supported the formation of the Committee Representing Pyithu Parliament, aimed at implementing the results of the 1990 General Elections. However, the military regime arbitrarily arrested hundreds of students, members of political parties and politicians, and activists; and imposed long prison sentences. These responses seemed aimed to cut the roots of and eradicate anti-military organizations and individuals.

Becoming an Inmate in Insein

When I was arrested, I knew I was innocent, so I did not resist and followed the security forces with a brave face. When I arrived at the police station near Hledan junction, I gave my name and some background information; then had my head blindfolded by a sack, being told "we're only doing our duty". The police then put me in a vehicle and took me somewhere. It was difficult to know where I was being taken with the blindfold on.

Eventually, I had to leave the car and walk for a while. I was asked to keep my head down at several points. Then they asked me to sit on a chair, head still covered. It seemed that I was in a house of some sort. The legs of the chair I was sitting on were imbalanced; I had to be very careful since it often tilted as I moved. Soon, a man appeared and asked me several questions, including about my biography and how and why I participated in the student protests. His voice was tranquil and placid, as if

he was questioning someone he knew or of his acquaintance. Then things went silent. It seemed that he had gone away. And then someone else came in: the one who would call my name, followed by cursing and beating.

“So you’re Shan Gyi, huh?” the person shouted at my covered face. *Bam! Bang! Pow!* He rained his fists down upon me before I could even say anything. He repeated this basic questioning and physical torture at his own discretion. No matter whether I responded or stayed silent, he would instantly beat me. He would then leave me and the calm investigator would appear again, asking questions, only for the violent aggressor to return once more. I cannot remember how many times this taking turns repeated. I also cannot remember how many times I answered the same questions over and over again. There were also numerous other torture techniques.

The headcover was removed only when having my meals. I could finally look about while eating and left alone. I saw I was inside the room of a ground-level bungalow. (Later, I found out that it was a building attached to Insein central prison for special prisoners.) After three days of this brutal treatment, I was moved again. I was full of worry: would I be taken somewhere even worse?

The security forces put me in a room and removed my headcover. A wooden bedstead, aluminum bowl, and a pot of water near an iron-barred door came into my vision. I lay down on the bedstead. There was no one there to interrogate me. I removed one of my shoes and put it under my head for a pillow. I had not slept for three days and was exhausted. I blanked out my mind, temporarily forgot all my current sufferings and slept very well.

The next day, I heard noises from the neighboring cell: people were introducing one another. My life as a person without freedom had begun. I became acquainted with other detained students from the YIT and made new friends with students from Insein GTI. A week later, student detainees were separated into two groups. Five YIT students, including me, and eight Insein GTI students had to remain, and the rest of the students were sent back home. Since our cells were side-by-side, I remember

they were constantly pounding on the walls to signal that they wanted to leave the prison and return home. The day after that batch was released, we remaining detainees from YIT and GTI were sent to the Insein central prison. We were transported with our head covers on as usual. We entered the central prison, and as we approached Building No. 2 (known as *yin kwel tike* in the prison), I heard someone calling and greeting “Shan Gyi, Shan Gyi”. (I found out later that it was an old friend, who seemed encouraged to have seen me. This was indeed a strange feeling.)

On 15 January 1999, we 13 YTI and GTI students were sentenced to seven years imprisonment under Section 5-J of the Emergency Provisions Act. Our trial proceeded inside the prison, not at the outer court. An ad-hoc tribunal was formed near the prison, and we were imprisoned without the right to a defense or power of attorney. Surprisingly, none of the students were interested in their prison sentences. Instead, they talked to each other, not even listening to the judge.

After six months of staying inside Insein Prison, we students and some other political prisoners were transferred and sent to prisons located in other townships. We were first taken to the military halls and had our legs chained, then we were sent to Yangon Central Railway Station. We were transported in a special compartment on a train leaving for Mandalay. The day was 6 April 1999.

A Shan Man in Mandalay (Obo Prison)

We arrived at Obo (Mandalay Central) Prison in Mandalay on 7 April 1999. Although Obo prison turned out to be the final destination for some in the group, including me, others were sent on again to other prisons. There were a lot of political prisoners from different organizations in Obo prison. Freedom inside the prison was somewhat restricted at the beginning. However, after a visit from the International Committee of the Red Cross, and some in-prison resistance, a few freedoms were secured to a certain extent. We prisoners could play games of cane ball (*chintlone*), move and communicate between buildings, and

access cultural and religious literature. Prisoners inside Obo prison ranged from members of student unions, members of the All Burma Students Democratic Front North army (they experienced the Pajaung Massacre, when 39 people were killed during a purge in Waingmaw Township), members of the National League for Democracy, who won the 1990 General Elections but were prevented from forming government, and even members of the Burma Communist Party.

Inside the prison, prisoners spent their days participating in music groups, Chinese and English language learning groups, etc. Some learned political lessons and concepts from seniors who had political experience. There were also a lot of protests inside the prisons. Prisoners protested against in-prison oppression so that they could read books, receive education, enjoy freedom of movement, and access to sports. As such, our prison experience was almost as if the political activists were enrolled in a postgraduate degree in politics. Discussing politics outside the prison posed a risk of imprisonment—but inside the prison, it was standard conversation.

Requests and demands from the political prisoners in Obo prison only increased in scale, resulting in prison authorities and special intelligence trying to end it on 30 May 2000. They scrutinized some of my sculptures and suppressed, beat and punished the political leaders who led and participated in inmate protests. These leaders were then sent to other respective state prisons. Fifteen minutes after beating inmates with rubber-covered batons, they allowed official doctors to provide medical attention, like putting ice on the wounds, to avoid bruises being left. It was obvious that their torture was premeditated and well prepared. Ten prisoners were transferred due to this incident.

Paying Daily Homage to Kyaikthalan of Yarmanya Land (or) Meeting with Mon Ethnic Leaders

On 31 May 2000, Ko Wanna Maung (*Thakin* Bathaung's grandson), Ko Htein Lin, Maung Tin Thit (Ko Yee Mon), and I were sent

to Mandalay airport. We were taken to Yangon from Mandalay by air. As we arrived at Yangon airport, two military vehicles awaited us. Ko Htein Lin and Maung Tin Thit were asked to get into a second car where they would be taken to Myaungmya prison. Ko Wanna Maung and I were transported to Mawlamyine prison. On a side note, this was my first time getting a free ride from the government.

My body ached from the beating at Obo prison for two months after I arrived at Mawlamyine. In the beginning I was kept separate from other political prisoners. I was put in a compound with inmates who were being punished for their activities while in prison, along with those on death row. The compound was notorious for being haunted. Even the prison officers dared not patrol around at night alone. There were many inmate protests during our stay there; participants were being taken to our compound and tortured. There was one death. The sounds of all the screams and beatings traumatized me and I was petrified the officers would come for me one day. I survived in that compound for four months, unable to talk to anyone. Not even the prisoners who helped deliver meals to other inmates or prison staff spoke to us. They were warned that anyone seen talking to us would be punished. From this experience, I learned that forbidding someone from being talked to is cruel. It is a form of hell. I had to cope entirely independently and learn how to spend each passing day. I was starting to comprehend why the political prisoners from the colonial era descended into insanity, a period where they would be threatened with the saying, “six months prison term for every young activist”.

After four months in this compound, I was put in the section where other political prisoners were kept. Strangely, the Kyaikthalan pagoda, high on top of a mountain, could be seen from this compound. Perhaps the most invaluable experience for me during my stay in that prison was meeting and getting to know Mon ethnic leaders. They patiently and enthusiastically explained ‘ethnic politics’ to me, a person of Shan ethnicity. They talked about the history of ethnic politics, discussed the root

causes of the struggles for federalism, and explained why the civil war was happening.

Apart from Mon ethnic leaders, there was quite a diverse group in Mawlamyine prison, including members of democratic forces, senior politicians and political leaders, students, and youth activists. Little did I know that my experience in Mawlamyine prison would become a good foundation and stepping-stone for my future life as a politician. I did not think it would become such a driving force for me to get involved in ethnic politics.

Finally, after two years of internment and valuable life lessons in Mawlamyine prison, political prisoners were given pardons to ease the tense political situation on the outside. Students from YIT and GTI, who were imprisoned explicitly for their affiliation with student politics, were taken from their respective prisons on 27 July 2002. We were assembled at the special intelligence department at nine-and-a-half-mile in Yangon before being handed back to our parents on 28 July. Since my hometown was Lashio, military intelligence connected with the corresponding branches from Shan State and sent me there.

Myanmar Institute for Democracy: Rendezvous for the 1996-1998 Student Generations

When I reached the outside world, there was not much opportunity for me to dive into politics immediately. Not only was my social circle not wide enough, but my experiences in politics were relatively few. Therefore, I prioritized generating income through a business career. The job hunt is challenging for ex-political prisoners. Nevertheless, I secured some work I was interested in.

I was employed first as a 'work check' at a construction site; then a site manager; detail designer; project manager; project director; chief operating officer; and construction consultant. My career extended to small and medium-sized enterprises, including gem extraction and trading businesses. Like a beating drum rhythm that undeniably lured a theatric performer to

dance, what dragged me back into the world of politics was the news that an organization would be founded with the ex-prisoners and students of the 1996-1998 movement.

From January 5-6 2013, the students of the 1996-1998 movement held a congress. At the congress, the Myanmar Institute for Democracy (MID) was founded by the unanimous vote of all attendees. Future plans were discussed. The constitutional charter of the MID was validated and 11 directors, including me, were elected by majority to lead the organization under a democratic system. I was able to reintegrate into and be part of Myanmar politics by acting as a director of MID, which did its best to contribute to Myanmar politics. Although MID did not reach its aims, it achieved recognition to certain extent. The MID still firmly stands as a sanctuary, a rendezvous, and a place of union for the 1996-1998 student generations.

Shan Nationalities League for Democracy: Building a Federal Union

I had heard about the Shan Nationalities League for Democracy (SNLD) or as people call it, the “Tiger Head Party”—its strong policies, affirmative beliefs, and standpoint on building a federal union, and that the party leaders actively participated in ethnic affairs. But I never thought I would become one of its members, nor one of its leaders. Life is sometimes mysterious—is it a coincidence or a deliberate creation of a higher force?

During my term as a director of MID, I organized a meeting in Yangon with Dr. Min Soe Lin, general secretary of the Mon Party, whom I met in Mawlamyine prison; and with Sai Nyunt Lwin, general secretary of the SNLD, and Sai Laik (or) Sai La, co-general secretary of the SNLD. We met at the Million Coin restaurant, near the entrance road to Yangon airport. The leaders persuaded me to get involved in ethnic politics. However, according to the MID charter, MID directors cannot be members of a political party. I made a decision to actively participate in ethnic politics, officially resigned from the MID director position, and joined the SNLD.

I engaged in dialogue during two conferences led by the SNLD, attended by the United Nationalities Alliance (UNA) and partners; and other meetings between the UNA and the United Nationalities Federal Council (UNFC). As political dialogues bloomed and I was aware of the importance of a framework for such dialogue, I led the drafting of a political dialogue framework for the SNLD. Afterwards, I also led the drafting of the political dialogue framework of the UNA. I also represented the SNLD countless times at meetings and dialogues between the UNA and its alliance, the UNFC.

On 15 October 2015, the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) was signed between eight ethnic armed organizations and the ruling government. According to the NCA, the Joint Implementation Coordination Meeting was responsible for forming a Joint Monitoring Committee and the UPDJC. At the second UPDJC meeting held on 24 November 2015, I represented the SNLD and was elected as a secretary of the UPDJC. As such, my duties and responsibilities involved performing the role of secretary of UPDJC, a key driving force in striving for national peace.

I was then elected as co-general secretary two of the SNLD during the multi-township conference of the party. The party's empowerment of and trust in young people was incredibly encouraging. Serving as co-secretary of the party for a few years enlightened me on the party's commitment, its democracy literacy, and the trust it has vested in youths. Right now in 2016, I am serving as a co-general secretary of the party, a technical assistance member of the UNA, a secretary of the UPDJC, and a secretary member of the UPDJC's working committee.

This short article is an attempt to document and portray my life as a student activist, the ups and downs, the trials and tribulations of life, my experiences of imprisonment, my affiliation with a political party, and my works to advance the union peace process on behalf of the SNLD. I sincerely hope this article will help sow a seed that contributes to building a democratic union.