



The Call of the Peacock: The Objectives of Student Movements in the 1970s

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Abstract

In Burma, ever since there were schools and universities, there have been student movements. Students have protested because of the poor education system, social and political conditions, and because of the laws, acts, orders and rules and regulations that suppressed students. Students must be involved in politics and require student unions—necessary characteristics of democracy—in order to organize. Students have been and continue to be vital to the progress of the country and are inseparable from the public, who have long supported them.

I

Progress is carried on by the few people who are passionate about it.

- Dagon Taryar

What is progress? Progress is a move from nothing to something, from being dependent to being independent, and from being a colony to a self-governed polity. If we look back at the history of Myanmar (Burma), gaining independence from British colonial rule was one instance of progress. Being victorious in the fight against fascism with the spirit of the people's freedom was also progress.

Transitions from dark to light, from a one-party dictatorship to a multiparty political system, from no democracy to democracy, from lack of human rights to enjoying them, from civil war to national peace, from a nation divided to a nation unified; these are all examples of progress. During Myanmar's struggle against colonial rule and fascism, through its attempts to gain

freedom for the whole nation, with all the efforts made to gain independence, the people most passionate about progress led the revolutionary movements and organizations.

Throughout history, who are the few that passionately carry progress forward through investing their sweat and blood? The answer is “students”. Students can be defined as those who are actively studying at educational institutions and therefore moving societal progress forward. In this way, the history of the progress of Myanmar (Burma) is intertwined with the history of student movements.

Thanks to the coordination of the Rangoon College Buddhist Association, which was organized by students, the Young Men’s Buddhist Association was founded in 1906. Those students, who also organized and led the Burma Youth Association, founded the *Dobama Asiayone* (We Burman Association), the central group in the independence movement.

Once the British invaded Myanmar and ended the Konbaung dynasty after the third Anglo-Burmese war, our country lost its royal army. When the *Dobama Asiayone* was founded, the *Dobama Ye Tat* (police force), an unarmed force, was organized. The All Burma Federation of Student Unions (ABFSU) also organized the Thamani Force (Steel Force). These were the core forces that made up the new Myanmar armies. From them, the Burma Right Hand Army, Burmese Defense Army, Burmese Patriotic Army, Bama Army, and People’s Army were formed. Therefore, we can say that students were the origin of these new armies.

The students in unions were selfless, did not earn any money from their activities, and sacrificed themselves for the good of others. They founded the Nagani Book Club with the aim of spreading progressive ideologies. The most united organization in Myanmar history, the *Hpa Hsa Pa La*, the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), was also organized by students. Members of the union were grouped into the Thirty Comrades, as well as the Parachute Force who bravely sacrificed their lives to gain independence.

The people of Myanmar value the ABFSU, with its storied history, and love students. If there are students, there must be a

union, and a building for that union. But why should anyone organize a student union? A student union is essential in a democratic country. It is necessary to have unions for workers in every sector. Such civilian organizations provide checks and balances to hold the government to account in a democratic system. In one record by the famous Myanmar author, Theik Pan Maung Wa, he explains how students were trained to become good leaders by the Oxford University Student Union.¹

“We have organized the All Burma Students’ Union (ABSU) to train students to be united and to know what to do and how to do it. Joining the union is the duty of patriotic students”, said Ko Aung San, the chairman of the union. These words still live within the Myanmar people. In building a democratic nation, a student union is necessary to build unity, to know what to do and how to do it, and for leaders and the people to be able to communicate effectively.

“The student union must be free from the undue influence of political parties”, said Daw Aung San Suu Kyi at the Taunggyi National League for Democracy party office on 13 February 1989. “A student union is not a true union if it is not allowed to be involved in genuine politics”, she continued. She also said, “If youths are not to be involved in politics, democracy will never develop”. Therefore, students must be involved in politics. To be able to do so, student unions must be formed. Student unions are essential to democracy.

II

Students do not come from some special walk of life. They are the sons and daughters of people. Water cannot be divided. Similarly, students and people cannot be divided. Consider fish and water. Just as fish depend on water to survive, students depend on the support of parents. If parents are not well off and cannot support their children to study at school, then children cannot continue their studies.

¹ ဝါ မောင် သိပ္ပံ-၂၀၀၇။

When parents have hard times and are in difficult situations, they protest against the authorities and let their feelings out. At such times, students join their parents in the protest. Likewise, every student movement is supported by the people. To use a martial example, the students and the people are like the tip and the handle of a spear. In combat it is ineffective to use only one part. The sharp point must be fixed strongly to the handle so that the target is not missed.

From the first students strike in 1920, to those in 1936, 1938, 1962, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1977 and then the people's revolution in 1988, the support of the people has been amazing. For the students at the strike camps, everything they needed, such as bags of rice, cans of cooking oil, blankets, pillows, mosquito nets and mattresses were provided by the public, including people from Theingyi market in Rangoon and Zegyo market in Mandalay. In the U Thant uprising of 1974, people took off their jewelry and offered it to the strikers to show their respect to U Thant and show their love to students. Those who witnessed this event had goosebumps.

As students are supported by the people, they never hesitate to join and help the people whenever they are in trouble. The most famous relevant event in recent history is the strike of oil field workers led by student leader Ko Ba Hein. Up until the 1930s, oil field workers worked like cattle and their life was not of a human standard. They had no chance to enjoy the fruits of their labor. There was no guarantee for their social welfare. Although they reported their difficulties and problems to the officials concerned, no one helped them to solve their problems. Therefore, a group of strikers led by *Thakin* Po Hla Gyi marched to Rangoon to protest against the oil field authorities. Along the way common people and farmers also joined and helped the protesters.

The strike force, composed of 2,000 workers and 20,000 farmers, was suppressed by the British authorities. They imposed a curfew under section 144 of the Code of Criminal Procedure and captured the strike leaders. The strike force could not continue their journey and was stranded in Magway Division, so

the ABFSU sent two leaders, Ko Ba Swe and Ko Ba Hein, to help the strikers. The *Dobama Asiayone* also sent representatives to help the strike force. In this joint event of workers, farmers and students, Ko Ba Hein's remarkable words of confrontation were recorded in history: "At one strike of the horse hoof, there will be burning fire".

In 1962, General Ne Win began nationalizing the country's economy—at the barrel of a gun. To make their military dictatorship official and perpetual, the ruling generals created a new constitution. Although the people were against the 1973 constitutional referendum, the military dictators still enacted the constitution with fake votes, and the 1974 Constitution was promulgated.

Following this, socialism was formally introduced by the military dictatorship, and the people of the country became very poor. As poverty-stricken workers could not stand their difficult situation, they decided to fight for their rights instead of facing starvation, and went on strike. In March 1974 a strike started at the Paleik textile factory and was joined by workers in towns down the Ayeyarwady river, before spreading across the whole country like a wildfire, sparking still further strikes.

Although the student union building was destroyed, there was union spirit in the hearts of students, and they felt that workers' problems were their own. So they joined and helped the Paleik workers' strikes with all their might. Students occupied the factory, closed the gate, and helped the striking factories to communicate with each other and exchange information. Students collected food, medicine, and other necessary items from the public and gave them to the strikers. Groups of guitarists, who regularly entertained female university students in the evening, also went to the camps and entertained the strikers to give moral support.

The military dictators at the time never dealt with any problems by identifying and solving the root causes; instead they accused political left- and right-wing forces of instigating the strike. The workers responded bravely and said, "Yes, but if it was instigation, it was one inspired by hunger".

Instead of giving the rice and oil (basic foods) asked for by the workers, the dictators gave them bullets. As far as I remember, on 6 June, at Thamaing Red Square, Ko Win Aung (a law student) was shot dead on the street. Ko Soe Win (a student from the Institute of Medicine 2), Ko Win Sein (a student from the Rangoon Institute of Technology), and Ko Khin Maung Aye (a student from the Arts and Science University) were wounded and detained. Because of the brutal suppression by the military dictators, at least 46 workers, students and civilians were shot dead and 123 were wounded in the aftermath of the 1974 strike in Rangoon alone.

If there is fuel, a spark can cause a great fire. The 1974 U Thant uprising, the 1 June 1975 anniversary of the workers' strike (also called the Shwedagon Pagoda uprising), and the 1976 centenary of the Thakin Ko Daw Hmaing uprising followed the 1974 workers' strike.

In addition to entrenching the new 1974 Constitution, the dictator Ne Win and the military also distorted the national anthem. They deleted the initial part of the anthem which says "justice, freedom, equality" and the word "Bama" was replaced by "Myanmar", although it does not rhyme with the words at the beginning: "*kaba ma kyae*". With the problematic change of "ba" into "ma", the authorities cunningly tried to destroy the unity shared by different ethnic groups in the country, and new unions were founded.

Inmates in all prisons had to sing the new national anthem each morning. Though the strikes in 1974, 1975 and 1976 had different aims, their main aim was to eliminate the military dictatorship and to repeal the 1974 Constitution. The heads of the students who were imprisoned during the strikes were bloody. They never kneeled. In the prison, they refused to sing the national anthem to show that they disapproved of the new constitution. They received brutal beatings and solitary confinement as punishment without complaint.

When civil war spread around the whole country soon after independence, some people celebrated the march for peace led by Thakin Ko Daw Hmaing. In line with the song of the ABSU:

“We march, holding the hand of the people, we always trust the people, we will always serve the people and the blood of the whole ABSU is always red”, the students helped the march with all their might. They welcomed and entertained the columns of people marching for peace. With the Kay Thi Pan music band, the songs of peace spread throughout the whole country and the wings of the dove fluttered.

When a destructive natural disaster, Cyclone Nargis, struck the country in 2008, it was students who buried many of the corpses upon which flies were resting. It was a sorrowful sight to see. The military government did not take any responsibility or accountability for the response. It was also students who planted the flag of the fighting peacock at Letpadaung Taung to show that people disapproved of China’s Wanbao mining project which aimed to sell off Myanmar’s public natural resources, enriching the generals at the expense of the country’s people and society.

Students offered free education to the poor. They personally went to war victims and offered food and clothing out of kindness and sympathy. They helped with the problems of workers, farmers, slum dwellers and children selling flowers at the roadside. Students perform the duties which history has put on their shoulders, actively fulfilling the needs of the people and helping the people to solve problems.

III

The British colonial rulers gave the Burmese people slave education, but the imperialists still valued education. They valued students. They valued the university and the student union. Under colonial rule, students had freedom of movement. The most serious punishment given to a student was dismissal from their educational institution. The government was rarely involved in students’ affairs.

After gaining independence, when the country finally had a government formed by its own citizens, the Rangoon University campus buckled under the noise of fire engines and water

cannons, which brutally blasted students. There were noises of tear gas and shooting. Every government that ruled the country tried to destroy student unions. The Rangoon University campus, with its rows of Ceylon ironwood trees, has seen much bloodshed since October 1953, when students asked for a month of holiday, and the Ava gate uprising took place. In 1956, the Minister of Education tried to replace the student union with a 'Students' Council'. They formed groups of students who were loyal to them with the aim of disintegrating student unity. After General Ne Win unlawfully took power in March 1962, the new Revolutionary Council government repealed acts two and three, the Rangoon University and Mandalay University acts. The military quickly intruded onto university campuses, shot students dead and destroyed the student union building at the University of Rangoon. Those students who did not die were captured and sent to the Coco Islands. If students evaded detention, their parents were taken as hostages. Students could not live in the cities and towns and had to seek asylum in liberated areas to continue the fight against the military government.

Similarly, students were killed, captured, and imprisoned during strikes in 1974, 1975 and 1976. The government committed an indelible offense in 1976, sentencing and executing Chin student leader Ko Tin Maung Oo, who did not commit any crime and who carried no weapon. As students could not bear the suppression, they went underground, armed themselves and participated in people's democracy movements.

During the 8888 Uprising, the Myanmar military took the power from the people once more. They showed their capacity to rule by making blood pools on streets. Some students were killed, some were imprisoned, and some fled to liberated areas and joined ethnic armed organizations.

If the military is weak, no soldier can even afford to drive a jeep. To maintain its strength, the military keeps civil wars alive and continues to rule the country with fake peace. Seventy years after gaining independence, there is no major ethnic group in Myanmar without a corresponding armed organization.

With the longest-running civil war and military dictatorship in the world, a student-led armed force was founded, like no other country in the world. Due to the unbearable oppression of military rule, students took various means to rebel against the government, depending on the type of suppression and the political situation in each context. They went on strikes in towns and cities, carried out underground operations and armed themselves to fight against the government.

IV

Before WWII, Marxism was popular among the educated people of the world. Marxism has also long been popular among students in Burma. After getting a Bachelor of Arts degree, independence leader Ko Aung San decided not to continue his studies for a Bachelor of Laws degree and joined the *Dobama Asiayone*, taking the title *Thakin* (Master). He became actively involved in politics. When Ko Aung San and a group of students joined the *Dobama Asiayone*, the flag of the association was changed from a peacock with three colors to a hammer and a sickle (which represent workers and farmers respectively) with three colors.

Leftist content could be found in the magazines published by the union after 1936. After the fifth conference of the ABSU, the handwritten newspaper *Ah Ye Daw Pon* was published under the leadership of Ko Ba Hein, Ko Tun Shein (Bo Yan Naing) and Ko Ko. The logo of the newspaper was a hammer and a sickle. Then, in 1938, after the oil workers' strikes (which are also known as the 1300 Uprising, named after the Buddhist era year), Ko Aung San, Ko Ba Hein and Ko Hla Pe (Bo Let Yar) founded the Communist Party of Burma, influenced by international Marxist ideology.

In the 1950s, the prospect of World War III threatened the world, with a major war in Korea and a nuclear crisis in Cuba. World-famous writers, musicians, singers, scientists and educated people founded the World Peace Congress to work toward world peace and stop nuclear weapons. For some of that time, the chairman of the World Peace Council was Ko Htay Myaing

(Dagon Taryar). Ko Soe Thein was also a member. Students of the union collected a petition for world peace and against nuclear weapons.

When war erupted in Korea in 1950, the United Nations (UN) decided that it was North Korea who had invaded South Korea. The Burmese government approved of the UN decision. The Rangoon University Student Union (RUSU) did not issue a public statement at the time, as the union was mainly composed of students who supported the government. However, union members with progressive ideas were against the UN decision.

After 1950, the ABSU became a member of the International Student Union and participated in international activities. They attended an anti-nuclear weapons conference in Hiroshima, Japan. They also attended the Peking Student Union conference in 1958 and the celebration of the Tenth Anniversary of the formation of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Although they could not attend conferences in Europe, they secretly asked Burmese students there to attend student union conferences when they could.

In the 1960s the United States (US) had a reputation for trying to be 'the world police'. Not only did they colonize North America and rule the indigenous people there, but they also pretended to help certain countries in Latin America, only to interfere with these countries' local affairs. Therefore, the ABSU had a meeting and decided to protest in front of the US Embassy.

The protests against military dictatorship in Myanmar in 1974, 1975 and 1976 coincided with protests at Seoul University in Korea and Thammasat University in Thailand. Students across Asia seemed to support and encourage each other. A strike in Czechoslovakia and the Tiananmen Square protests in the PRC also gave moral support to the 8888 Uprising in Myanmar.

Student leaders from the RUSU founded in 1930, and the ABSU founded in 1936, had ideologies consonant with their times. After the ABSU was founded, generations of student leaders practiced not only patriotism but also internationalism.

They could keep track of international affairs and were in touch with student activities in other countries.

V

In Burma, ever since there were schools and universities, there have been student movements. Students have protested because of the poor education system, and because of the laws, acts, orders and rules and regulations that suppressed students.

After the British colonists occupied Burma, they suppressed the Burmese people and crushed all rebellion. They tried to destroy the people's nationalist and patriotic spirit. To destroy the Bagan spirit, they opened a government office in Nyaung-U Township and made Bagan a jungle. Similarly, they opened government offices in Tada-U Township in order to destroy the Innwa spirit. To degrade Rakhine pride in Mrauk-U Township, they made Sittwe Town into a city. In Bago and Sagaing townships, they planned towns in the sites of palaces and the city walls became roads and streets. In Mandalay, they turned the palace compound into an army camp and declared the area out of bounds.

The British colonists demanded the people call them "master" and the people had to use the term "*payar*" when replying to them (a response usually reserved for a monk or a king). They ordered that the people must pay obeisance to British teachers and education officials. This inappropriate order was successfully opposed by students in 1903, becoming the first victory of Burmese students under British rule. The British colonists tried to legislate the Rangoon University Act which was objected to by the Burmese people as it was not appropriate for their lives. However, the colonists continued their efforts, and the first students' strike broke out.

More sparks flew from minor cases. Ko Soe Myint did not use the word "sir" in response to a roll call, and Ko Aung Myint took down a notice from a noticeboard, surmising it had expired. Because of these minor acts, these students were dismissed from Rangoon University. The editor Ko Aung San was

threatened with dismissal for editing the article, “Hell Hound at Large”, which appeared in Oway magazine. Because of the same article, the chairman of the ABSU, Ko Nu, was also dismissed. The sparks became a fire, and the second student strike of 1936 broke out. In fact, the cause of this strike was the mismanagement of the country by the colonists.

In 1936, when the oil field workers’ strike was suppressed, RUSU Chairman Ko Ba Hein, and Secretary Ko Ba Swe, together with representatives of the *Dobama Asiayone*, joined the strikers and helped them to march to Rangoon. Both were detained by British authorities as Ko Ba Hein’s speech was deemed disrespectful. Detaining the chairman and the secretary was an insult to the students, so they marched around the secretariat opposing the section 144 curfew, previously mentioned. Tensions escalated between the students and British authorities over the years and in 1938, student Ko Aung Kyaw was killed by police during a demonstration where students blocked access to the secretariat, and the third students’ strike eventually broke out.

We generally understand that the third students’ strike occurred because Ko Ba Hein and Ko Ba Swe were detained by British authorities.

When we were detained, it was like giving a signal to the students who were ready to go on strike. In fact, the strike might have been postponed if we had not taken. Whether we were abducted or not, there would definitely have been a strike sooner or later. So, detaining us was like setting sparks on an explosive. Our detention was not the only cause of the strike.²

This is true. Every student movement was a form of protest against colonial rule and for national freedom. Whatever the immediate cause was, students protested against suppression and unfair laws as their duty. The slogan of the first students’ strike in 1920 was, “We don’t want slave education”. The slogan of the

² ဗဟိုနန်း၊ သခင်။ (n.d.)။

second strike in 1936 was, “Change the education system into a new one”, and the third strike’s was, “Provide more funds to education”. Students protested against the unsuitable policies and laws of the colonists and became famous and honorable for doing so.

After independence the AFPFL won the general elections and was in power for ten years. When ex-students became incumbent politicians, they tried to control student unions and mobilize students to support their own political parties, leading to disunity between students. Burma was the most developed nation Southeast Asia in that period. However, students opposed the orders from the authorities and there was a student movement in October 1953. In fact, the students only asked for one month of holiday. The Minister of Internal Affairs, who was once a leader of a student union, solved the problem with violence, painting the wall of Ava Hall at Rangoon University with student blood.

On the last day of the seventh-grade exam in 1956, questions from the exam were leaked and published in the *Burma Times* newspaper. Instead of finding a proper and systematic solution to the problem, which was caused by the mismanagement of authorities, those very authorities simply announced that the exam would be canceled. At that time, those who passed the seventh-grade exam got good jobs. Students who were dissatisfied with the cancellation of the exam went to the newspaper and protested. The government solved the problem using weapons and a student, Harry Tan, was shot and killed.

The Mandalay University strike of 1961 is another example of the one-sided decisions and violence of the government of the time. The authorities scheduled exams without fulfilling their teaching requirements. The students first asked for classroom furniture and for university staff to deliver lectures. They also asked the authorities to postpone the exam until furniture and teachers were provided. The authorities did not consent to the students’ request and used weapons and violence instead.

All these events show that student protests occur because of inappropriate laws against the people and because of students’

wishes and needs. Burmese students love to study and protest peacefully. Yet their requests have always been responded to by the authorities with force.

As mentioned, after Ne Win's military took power in 1962, the university acts were repealed. The university council, which was composed of university teaching staff, professors, students, and parents, was replaced by one formed by military officials. The freedom of youthful students was suppressed just as inmates were suppressed by prison authorities and privates were controlled by majors in the military. Student hostel regulations were like rules in the army. The authorities did not consider the nature of a university and neglected the will of students, causing problems. When students protested against the hostel rules, the authorities violently suppressed them. The student union building was bombed and destroyed.

After three strikes in 1974 and in 1975, the military imposed a section 144 curfew. During this strict military rule, why did the centenary of the Thakin Ko Daw Hmaing Uprising occur? To protest against the military dictatorship was one reason. The immediate cause was the raising of hostel fees. The previous fee of 57 Burmese Kyat was raised to 120. At that time, most government servants earned only 126 Kyat per month. So, poor students could not afford it. In training courses in Myanmar, trainees were told that it was 'out of date' to go onto the street and protest. However, in Korea, a developed country, the union building was destroyed from street protests, and in a leading democracy, America, the people took to the streets when Donald Trump became president.

The progress of a country does not depend on student movements alone. However, student movements are directly related to the government's attitude toward education and students and its unjustly strict rules and regulations.

VI

To sum up, students are those who are currently studying and working for progress. Student unions are necessary

characteristics of democracy. Students join and support the movements of the people regardless of the time and situation. The nature of student movements depends on the policy controlling the degree of suppression inflicted by the government. International student movements, which have relevance to the lives of Burmese people, influence Burmese students' movements. Student movements are not just concerned with the progress of a country but also the management, intelligence, and opinion of the government. The aim of the student strikes in Burma in 1974, 1975 and 1976 was to eliminate the military dictatorship and to repeal the 1974 Constitution.

References

- ဗဟိန်း၊ သခင်။ (n.d.)။ ကျောင်းသားအရေးတော်ပုံ။
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တကောင်းစာအုပ်တိုက်။