Interview with Ko Soe Htun, Former Student of the Yangon Institute of Technology

Sa Waw Htang

Abstract

In this 2022 interview, Soe Htun discusses his participation in the 1996 student movement in detail with Sa Waw Thang, the pseudonym of a writer in Myanmar. He covers how he became involved in the initial protests at the Yangon Institute of Technology when he was already five years into his studies. He charts the movement's expansion and the involvement of other university students, his experiences marching around the city and speaking at the Thamine and Hledan junctions in December of that year, and his interactions with ministers and the military intelligence. Eventually, Soe Htun was arrested and imprisoned for seven years by the military regime. Upon release, he was refused reentry to university to finish his degree and went on to work for several civil society causes instead.

Please tell us about the 1996 student movement.

On the evening of 21 October 1996, students from the Yangon Institute of Technology (YIT) marched to Kamaryut and Hledan townships to protest. I had no idea this was happening, despite living on Kamaryut Budaryone Road as a day student (I didn't stay in the university dormitory like others). When I left home for the campus the following morning, someone I know asked me about the protest. I replied that I didn't know.

By the time I arrived at the university, I was still thinking that the 'protest' must have been students fighting in a restaurant as usual, and that they would surely come back to the university to gather for more trouble, so I kept my nose out of it and didn't ask any questions. There was often news about this kind of fighting at the university. At YIT, there were more male students than females. Most students didn't like the education

system. To look for a way out of their depression, they drank alcohol. But other students, including some intelligent ones, just drank because they liked it. No matter how much these smart guys drank, they always attended class, and got the highest marks. One guy even renamed the dilapidated bus stop in front of our university, which was called the 'BPI' bus stop,[1] to the 'B.E.' bus stop.[2] On second thought, maybe it was called that by alumni who came before him.

Why else did so many people drink alcohol so often?

From my perspective it was also because that was a time when the military junta restricted student's freedoms, including the right to form a student union. It felt like the junta intentionally created a situation for students to turn to drugs. I even witnessed outsiders, non-students, coming onto the YIT campus to use drugs because the environment was so permitting. This didn't make me happy. I also disliked the university testing system, where examinations were only every four months for important subjects—both theoretical and practical.

What else can you say about the situation at YIT at the time?

In general, General Khin Nyunt, Chair of the National Education Committee, and his flunkies were destroying the education system. They brainwashed the minds of young people and students and got them hooked on drugs. They thought that they could keep young people and students away from politics. At that time I was already in my fifth year of study.

The Diamond Jubilee was approaching in 1996, so university dormitories and departments were being renovated. Khin Nyunt attended the Diamond Jubilee dinner party, asked businessmen

[1] This is an acronym for Burma Pharmaceutical Industry.
[2] Editor's note: B.E. is a cheap mix of industrial ethanol and water that is often served without waiting for the two to commix. It is notoriously toxic to drinkers' livers and heavy B.E. drinkers often die young.

to donate to the dormitory renovation fund, and took a picture with the students. This was the first time I saw him come out in public. He was actually late and arrived after dark, the last one to show up. It seems he was collecting full information about us because he was afraid of the power of the YIT student body. While waiting for him to arrive with my friends, I asked them, "Are you guys waiting to welcome him?" They replied that they were waiting to parade (*bo shu khan*). I liked that response.

That night some of us raised funds by selling cold drinks and fried gourd. I tried to sell the snacks and drinks with a microphone over a speaker system. In between my sales pitches, I also took the opportunity to preach some politics to the crowd. I said that good leaders needed to come forth. I said Myanmar would only improve if it had students with good education and morale. Even though I tried to keep it light by mixing in a little bit of religion with the politics, my friends interrupted me and stopped me from talking about sensitive stuff. The situation for most students was like that.

Going back to the student movement now, what else happened on 22 October, the day after the first protests?

That evening I went to a dormitory student friend's house in Kyot Kone to sleep over and copy some lessons I missed in class. At around 8 p.m. we heard screams and checked what happened. We were told that some students had clashed with the police. The students who protested the day before were angry over the government releasing a false press release saying that the police intervened to resolve a clash between students and the public: "The police did not know students were involved, so the police mistreated them". But there was no apology from the police or government. My friend and other dormitory students decided to go and join the protest. I agreed with their decision and went along to support them, even though I didn't know them that well (because I was a day student). We gathered at the university campus and then took a bus to gather at Thamine junction.

Some stuff that night made me uncomfortable. The students were angry about the false press release and were trying to stop all the buses and cars on the road, including private passenger cars—and I helped them. One of my memories from that night was stopping a Renault bus at about 9 p.m. All the passengers were asked to get off, without us explaining to them who we were. Some of the passengers were panicking and I explained to them that we were students and not to worry about it. The driver also helped us.

One pickup truck refused to stop and drove away from us, but there was no escape as other students were waiting along the road. One angry student punched the driver through the window and unexpectedly made him bleed. His child was in the car with him and started crying. I was upset and asked the student why he punched the driver. He was remorseful and we both apologized. The driver just wanted to go home. He might have had family waiting and worrying about him. The drivers and the public that night dealt with the situation very impressively.

What I want to say here is that the public values students. Even when students make mistakes, they understand and forgive.

What did you do after stopping the cars at Thamine junction?

We went to the nearby dormitories around Thamine and explained what was going on to the students there, inviting them to participate in the protest. The resident hall directors came out hesitantly and watched us but didn't stop us. We went around trying to recruit students, not only YIT dormitory students but also other university students, because we considered the violence and false press release to be a problem affecting all students. Some came out, but others stayed in because of the teachers blocking the stairways. Then we all went to Hledan Township, taking up position in the central traffic area of the junction. Students made speeches explaining the purpose of our demonstration. A group of us collected money to buy snacks and

food and went to Thirimingalar Market to buy bananas for everyone. Student protesters gave speeches for a long time. We shared the bananas among all the students. At that time, we find out that some student representatives had been called to negotiate with the *ah sa nya*.

What problems did you encounter during this protest?

After listening to the contents of the speeches for a while, I suggested to a student leader, who was in his final year of an electronics degree, that we should have student representatives in order to improve the education system. The leader immediately shouted to the crowd, "We students are demonstrating only to demand our student rights. We are not related to politics. We don't believe in politicians. Politicians are liars". I was disappointed.

The YIT students who went to negotiate with the *ah sa nya* authorities came back. They were talking among each other. After a while, one of them came to the rest of us, seated, and declared, "They will not fulfill our demands and asked us to disperse peacefully. If we don't disperse, they will use force to break up the crowd". Then he continued, "So we will go back to YIT and you will also go back to your universities".

That was surprising to me. All students were invited to participate in the protest, as it was about all students' affairs, but now these negotiators were asking everyone to go back to their universities without consulting any of the other students. I spoke up and said that they couldn't do this. It wasn't just YIT students at the protest. Shouldn't the other university students be considered? One student protester said to me, "YIT is safe to go back to. It is good to go back". I argued with him. Then some of the YIT rectors, professors, and lecturers came to the demonstration and told us to return to our dormitories. I stood up to them and identified myself: my name, university, and major. I talked about the purpose of the student protest. When I criticized the education system, voices from the student group shouted, "Don't talk politics". I changed the topic to being about

the three students who were beaten by police. The loudmouths went silent. In the end, most students agreed that we wouldn't go back. The professors and lecturers gave up and left.

In general, there was discord between most of the YIT students, who insisted on going back to the university, and most of the Art and Science University students, who wanted to stay. The YIT students said they had to leave for their university for security reasons. I said I would stay here with the remaining students. There were only a few YIT students who stayed in the end, most went back. We who remained discussed among ourselves what to do, but the members of the public who came to support our protest also gradually decreased, and finally we decided to go back to our campuses instead of sitting at Hledan junction for longer.

We pushed through the Yutadan Gate onto the Yangon University campus and went to the dormitories to invite more students to participate. We then headed on down Chancery Road. After that, we sat in front of the graduation hall and took turns giving talks. We discussed whether we should stay until dawn or not. Eventually, students began to get up one by one and leave. I asked whether we should stay here or go outside as we could still be arrested on campus. If we went out, which way should we go? Inya Road or University Avenue Road? (When I asked whether we should leave via University Avenue Road, I was accused of being a politician and/or a National League for Democracy [NLD] supporter.) While we were thinking of what the best way might be, some YIT professors came through the Yangon University of Economics entrance and told us to go back to YIT as soldiers were already surrounding Yangon University. We felt like we had fallen into the well while thirsty. We YIT students went back to our own campus with the professors.

After arriving at YIT, we sat in front of the main building, introduced ourselves properly to one another and exchanged information, including room numbers. We then went our separate ways with the plan to meet again the next day. But the next day, we heard that there were some people who wanted to take political advantage of student affairs by interfering. We heard

rumors from others that YIT students could not be trusted. In order to avoid misunderstandings among students, we wrote a letter with the true story of the student beatings, the Saw Bwar Gyi Kone incident, and distributed it among students, as well as organizing discussions at the YIT dormitories and main campus. I knew a final-year student who had contact with NLD offices and 'house number 54',[3] but I could not contact him.

While we were discussing the letter, resident hall directors interrupted us, and we had to disperse. This was a time when professor and student informants were always watching us. The rector and authorities asked students who were involved in the student movement to go back home. They called parents and asked them to take their students home. The three students who were beaten two days prior could not be found anywhere. The YIT students were still angry.

While we were trying to uncover the truth over the passing days, the rector called me by writing my name on a piece of paper and dropping it in our class. I went to wait for him at his office, where I saw Education Minister U Pan Aung with some other students on their way to the same office. In the past I heard that the minister would sometimes drive students who won sporting events back to the university to honor them. I heard that the rector was also asked to give awards in those situations. But this was not what was going on. The rector seemed to have called a meeting with the minister and some of us students for another purpose. The minister arrived and said:

> *We are working for the betterment of the country, such as development, peace, and stability. We don't want to see the suffering of our country when we get old and look back. We believe students will become the leaders of the country in the future. We want students to focus on their education and finish their education. We try to help as much as we can.*

[3] Editor's note: Referring to the home of National League for Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

I said to the minister, "I also want students to be educated. I come from a Buddhist family and am working hard to become an educated leader and a good human being. We want to have freedom to organize literacy talks. I don't want to see students on drugs. If students were drunk and using drugs, legal action could be taken, but instead, municipal police use violence and beat students, which is not acceptable".

This led to no solution though, so what did you do?

Well, the next day, the students who led and were involved in the Saw Bwar Gyi Kone incident were called to meet with professors and the rector. Officially they were summoned for putting up a poster in the dormitory. I didn't know about it at the time. The rector didn't seem to want me on campus. He told Professor U Ba Myint, who was in my department, to arrange for me to join a field trip. I said I couldn't go, but they insisted. The rector, U Than Sein, said, "Just go. Even when you come back from the trip, you can still protest". The rector seemed to be giving me a signal that another protest was going to happen. I even told one of my friends not to work so hard because we wouldn't be able to graduate this year. He was shocked by what I said. He remarked, "No way, my friend, I have to graduate this year". I still remember him saying this.

The field trip went for five whole days. Although it was tiring, it was a successful trip because I got to meet junior students. The day after I got back, a letter addressed to me was delivered to my house. The letterhead said, "Petition letter to students". In the letter it said that "YIT students are bad; they drink alcohol, do not pay bus fares, get into fights, protest, and are stooges of politicians who disturb peaceful learners. That's why we oppose these students". At the end of the letter, it was signed off by "those who want to study in peace". That letter was on the desk in the classroom as well as delivered to the students who led the event in Zaw Bwar Gyi Kone. The letter was typed on a computer. It looked very systematically prepared and sent to us. We assumed it was done by the authorities.

What a lot of tricks! How did you respond?

This letter was an opportunity for us. We YIT students decided to prepare our own statement defending ourselves and took the plan to the rector. Surprisingly the rector approved it. We were delighted. The first step was successful. We agreed to post our statement in the classroom building as well as on the notice board in Building 1 on the first day of school, which was to be Monday, 2 December. That morning, before meeting again with the rector, we asked students to bring along four or five people from each dormitory to show strength. We were excited. But when we happened to see the rector and professors at the entrance of Building 1 the rector's face was very firm. It was like he didn't remember us discussing the plan with him at all. The professors also seemed upset. We informed the rector that we had already gathered the students, as we had discussed with him. He said with consternation, "Come to my office".

We followed him there at about 9 a.m. and he informed us that the statement had been rejected by the higher authorities. They had called our respective professors and asked whether we were students or not. We came out of the office, about six of us. Since the rector had not approved our action, it was now our own decision to go ahead. The students had gathered and were ready to go. They were eager to know what happened and asked us about our meeting with the rector. We explained it all. Should we read out and disseminate our letter of response anyway?

Many students were not happy about what happened with the rector and were now hesitant to distribute our reply. I was also worried but I decided to read out the statement to the gathered students anyway. When I started reading it, I had to keep my voice from shaking. I thought I wouldn't make it. Fortunately, I managed to finish it quickly. More students had come down during the reading however, and they asked me to read it again. While I was reading it again, students made copies of it and went around explaining it to all the first- and second-year classes.

After that, all the students gathered at Building 1 and talked about our demands. Some students were invited to go and negotiate with the authorities. The remaining students insisted that if the authorities really valued students, as they often said they did, and if they really believed students are the leaders of the future, they should come to YIT to consider our demands. This went past lunch time, so we collected money and bought lunch. Not long after, the students who went to negotiate with the authorities came back. They demanded authorities refrain from taking action against the students who led the protest, from expelling students from university, and from closing the university. The authorities agreed on these points, but they disagreed on disclosing the truth to the press and issuing an official apology to students in the media.

We students began to leave. We protested in front of the Kyot Kone dormitory, shouting our demands, and then we had to decide whether to go outside the university or not. We wanted the public to know about the situation, but some students were hesitant to go out. One student brought a chair for me to stand on and asked me to make a unilateral decision. I decided we should go out, so that we could get support from students from other universities and from the public.

We decided to begin the protest proper in the evening time. We reached out to students from other universities and by the time we left the campus in the late afternoon, other students had already mobilized outside. We pushed down the campus gate that was locked with a big chain and left YIT. When we reached the public roads, we tried not to block them. We always kept to once side so that the public could use half the road without being disturbed. We used plastic rope so as not to mix with outsiders and began our protest by walking, demanding justice and freedom. As foreign media were informed in advance, some journalists joined us and reported on our departure from the campus. Ko Ko Thet was the one in charge of speaking to the media and translating to journalists the purpose of our protest.

Along the way, the support of the public was encouraging. They clapped and showed support. We shouted and chanted our

demands, explaining the purpose of our protests along the way. After we passed Thamine junction, we headed to Hledan junction and then continued walking to Marlar Hall and Judson Church so that the Yangon Art and Science University students would know about our protest. We stopped at the front of Judson Street and explained our protest and demands again. While I was explaining, my brother Aye Htut introduced me to a student from the geology department, Min Than Htut. He was once imprisoned for politics. He could not involve in protests actively. He said in a speech that if the protest was a failure, people should try not to get arrested, and he would also try not to get arrested. I gained strength from this.

Students had turned the 1997 calendar that were going to be sold for 'YIT Buddhist Family' fundraising into a poster, writing our slogans on it. We went back to Hledan junction when it got dark and spoke to students and the public about our protest and our demands to the authorities. I had already lost my voice since long before. The Yadana Tun store owner U Maung Muang donated water bottles to us. A woman stopped her car and donated packs of 200 Myanmar Kyat. Phyay Ko Oo, a fourth-year electrical power student, took responsibility as the finance manager, and some of us went to buy loudspeakers to speak in front of the crowd. One of my friends gave me a megaphone, but it didn't last long. Many students from different universities participated in the demonstration and sat at Hledan junction. Aung Khine, an economics major, Ko Khin Maung Win from philosophy, Aung Naing Min from international relations, Min Than Htut from geology, Maung Maung from education, and others formed a makeshift student group. Other groups distributed their own papers and one student from each grouping read them aloud to the crowd.

What kinds of papers?

Some of the papers clearly attacked and criticized the military dictatorship. One student said to me they'd heard mutterings from some other students who didn't like that. I monitored the

situation and told students to stop reading their papers aloud. We wondered whether we should keep sitting in Hledan junction as we could well be surrounded by soldiers. We also talked about what to do if the people were attacked with tear gas. In order to inform more of the public, we made a collective decision to move on and march to Kyeemyindaing Road.

From there we walked downtown to Thein Gyi Market and took a rest for a moment. We went up on the bridge there and again read out our main statement of demands about student affairs. Beyond that, there were also some voices calling for an end to the military dictatorship. We then went to Sule Pagoda and took a short break to pray and worship. The reason for doing this was to fill up on sacred substances and mental energy.

We didn't know what was going to happen if we went east from Sule Pagoda and passed in front of City Hall. We thought there could definitely be troops in the City Hall compound. We decided to avoid it and turned toward merchant street. We stopped in front of the US Embassy and told an officer there what we were doing. We then went up Pansodan Road, and when I looked back from the flyover there, the crowd of demonstrators stretched back as far as the eye could see. We were absolutely satisfied that the public fully supported us. One of the students from the electrical power major was running from the rear to the front of the crowd passing on messages and he was drenched with sweat from the effort. From the flyover we explained the reason for the protest to passengers who were waiting to board trains at Yangon Central Railway Station, so they could inform students at Mandalay and Mawlamyine about the protest.

At this point, a student and some reporters came to me and said that they were going to stay on in the downtown area of Yangon. But others wanted to push ahead north. As my own group continued toward Kandawgyi Lake, we accidentally took the wrong route and ended up on the side where the military offices were. About half of the total protesters were with us and half left in the downtown area.

What happened when you passed in front of the military compounds there?

We went on and noticed that the soldiers on duty at one of the military offices we were passing by were active. Some of the female students were taking a break from all the walking and I tried to encourage them on. I asked them whether they could continue to walk or not. By the time we got to the U Htaung Bo roundabout, something weird had happened: our pole with the peacock flag was broken in the middle. The flag didn't go down because everyone was still in control of it, but we couldn't move forward anymore.

We turned toward the Shwedagon Pagoda, but soldiers and police surrounded us before we could get there. An officer I recognized from the US Embassy was arguing with an army officer. After a while I also saw that a soldier of major rank, supposedly the leader, was giving orders to soldiers who were hiding and waiting on the left side of the road. Then, Education Minister U Pan Aung arrived and told all of us to go back to our schools. He said we could go back by car as transport had been arranged for us. We wanted to go back by peacefully marching instead and tried to get the soldiers to remove the roadblocks, but it was useless.

The major spoke fiercely to U Pan Aung, who then came over to us students and said the major couldn't be bargained with. Some professors and teachers also came and told us to go back and say goodbye. We expressed our respect for the teachers' generosity, but we also wanted our teachers to understand our demands and requests. We expressed our gratitude to the teachers and paid homage to them before they left.

What happened once the teachers left?

All the male protesters and protest leaders sat at the front of the crowd, and we told most of the women to stay behind us in the center of the crowd, but many of them also came out to the front and linked arms with us. Our supporters from the public were in

the west and inside the crowd. We watched the soldiers walk towards us with their shields raised. When they realized that we would not put up any resistance, they dropped their shields. Most of them were very young, the same age as us students. The major in charge ordered them to interrogate us but they were reluctant.

Eventually, that commanding officer himself slandered the soldiers and forcibly pushed some of them towards us, but because we were linking arms, they couldn't get through. Then, the soldiers started impatiently beating us on the heads and shoulders. When the violence started, the crowd dispersed and we were dragged into awaiting vehicles. When I was pushed into a car, one student alongside me shouted, with resentment, "The reason we're protesting is to improve your lives too!". When one student cried out that the soldiers were being cruel, one soldier made a gesture implying, "write it down and send a complaint". I told the students with me not to blame the soldiers and checked if anyone was seriously injured; they were OK. When the cars full of us detained students left the site, I saw one student leap out of a truck and melt away into the crowd. It was Min Than Htut, the geology major, who we found out later made it all the way to the Thailand border, where he died.

Where did the military take you?

First we were taken to Kyaikkasan stadium. I got down from the car and looked around while greeting other people alighting from another car. I saw that some of the women had been beaten and their skin had turned red, but most reported happily that they were unharmed. I admired and was proud of them. They were not frightened and their faces were smiling and clear.
The soldiers ordered us to sit down and separated us into groups based on our university. Then, they verified us YIT students with a teacher there and forced us onto designated benches. Other students were asked to sit on the iron stands. Some students grumbled that discriminating based on our university was

unacceptable. The students from YIT made up only a very small component of the more than 700 people arrested.

I was identified by the military intelligence (MI) and called up for interrogation. They asked me my personal information: name, father's name, university, class, address and forth on. They asked me why I protested. Then, they asked me to hold a wooden board with my name and father's name written on it for a photograph. However, I managed to get away from them and avoid it—I didn't accept being treated like a criminal. They tried to stop me but I pulled my hand away and mingled into the crowd. I was also getting a bit dizzy from a strike to my head earlier.

I actually dozed off for a while after that as I had stayed up the whole day and night. The soldiers found me again and this time came up to me with archivist and teacher U Hla Gyi, saying they had to ask more questions. U Hla Gyi even said to me that the authorities were correct and that I was responsible for my actions and had to explain them. But I refused to talk.

The soldiers backed off for a bit and we students took advantage of the break. We started talking to one another, congratulating each other, clapping and encouraging each other. But then two military people approached us: Aung Khine and another person whose name I don't remember. They singled some of us out to meet General Than Tun, including me. We went along and listened. The general said that the authorities were going to release us, and they wanted us to stay on our best behavior. He also reproached us, saying "the government is doing as much as it can", and that the authorities were repairing the school buildings and toilets. Finally, the Minister of Education called on the phone and rumors that the students would be imminently released went around. I went back over to the students.

Was everyone released? What happened to the non-students that were detained with you?

The students were happy and ready to leave, but we didn't know about the other people who were detained with us. Some old men implored me directly to prevent them being imprisoned by the military just for supporting our protest. When the students started getting back in the cars and leaving, I stayed back and asked one of the soldiers nearby to go and get General Than Tun. It took a while, but I told him to release all the people detained there, since the reason they were detained was for simply supporting us. The general said that they would release them very soon but he still had some questions to check with them. I said that we students would only go back if they released the public supporters too. He went over to address the public supporters and told them that they would be released soon.

I decided to go back with the students then, but I left a message with my name, saying anyone could come to YIT if anything unusual happened. Back at YIT, many of us students again met up at Building 1 and discussed everything. We dispersed, deciding we would protest against the crackdown we had just experienced, and that we would go on strike until our demands are met. That day was 3 December 1996.

The following day when I arrived at the university, students were walking around the dormitories protesting. At Building 1 the students present again resolved to continue protesting the authorities' treatment of students. But we dispersed after agreeing not to leave the campus without first connecting to students from other universities.

Two days later, in the morning of 6 December, before I had even left home to go to YIT, soldiers sent by General Aye Kyaw from the Ministry of Information detained me. They kept me at the Ministry for a whole month and finally let me go me with a press release. I immediately reunited with students and protested together with them in January. Our discontent endured. In order to facilitate meetings and connections, we opened a

book shop named '*amyin thit*'—New Vision in English, in Zayar Thiri Lane, Hledan Township, in May 1997.

Then, YIT student Ma Aung Mi Khine, who was majoring in civil engineering, was killed by a car owned by a leader of the United Wa State Army, who was in Yangon for 'peace talks'. The driver and car fled the scene without taking responsibility. The case did end up being heard in court, at least, and we students visited the court to find out more information. We sent a letter to MI-7 Commander Major Hla Thet Maung urging him to ensure real justice was achieved in the case.

The next day, I was detained along with seven other students. I was imprisoned for seven years.

Thinking back, what were the results of the 1996 student movement?

Well, the student movement spread out to other universities and the authorities closed them down—but they didn't announce this officially. Instead, they announced that courses were temporarily suspended. They forced dormitory students to leave campus and go back home. The movement was a major political awakening for students from many universities. Throughout early December, institutions like Insein GTI, University of Medicine, Dagon University and others protested. Even universities in other cities such as Mandalay and Mawlamyine participated. Although the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) crushed the movement with violence, it damaged their reputation in the international community, who witnessed video footage of peaceful students being oppressed thanks to an international journalist who reported directly from Yangon. CNN World News reported tanks on display in front of City Hall and cars loaded with machine guns roaming around Sule Pagoda and downtown. Radio Free Asia also began broadcasting on 1 January 1997, based in Hong Kong despite opposition by the Chinese government.

The United States put economic sanctions on the SLORC. It hit the National Education Committee Chair General Khin Nyunt

hard, as he was boasting that the country was stable and students supported the regime. Universities were kept closed and the authorities could not even dare to organize the mayor's marathon, as they heard in advance that students would go there and make a speech with the peacock flag. They had to do events and ceremonies surreptitiously. They began using "divide and rule" strategies to sabotage student organizing by building universities far from the city and in smaller towns. Despite this, students still connected and networked well, and in 1998, the student movement was still going on amid prohibition by the regime. The December 1996 student movement was the result of all the previous democratic reform efforts in the history of Myanmar. I honor all the students and public who participated.

What did you do after you were released from prison?

I tried to go back to university but I wasn't allowed to attend. At that time, the minister of Science and Technology was U Thaung, who was from the same military batch as General Than Shwe. They were powerful. The MI had no permission to refuse my attendance at university, and the professors and lecturers welcomed me, but U Thaung ordered the ministry to reject my application. They sent me a rejection letter saying that I might disturb 'peaceful education'.

Then the Saffron Revolution hit in 2007. I continued to do underground politics and activism. I was named and given a prison sentence of 65 years without being actually detained, along with Ko Paw, Ko Mya Aye, Ko Ko Gyi and Ko Htun Myint. After Ko Min Ko Naing, Ko Ko Gyi, and Ko Pyone Cho were released in 2012, the 88 Generation Student Peace and Open Society group was formed and I joined them in their activism. We got involved in peace and national reconciliation and, together with Ko Mya Aye, I took charge as coordinator of the education and resettlement program. By establishing iSchool – Myanmar, we conducted trainings and discussions to strengthen civil society and peace by using information technology.

I also participated in the National Network for Education Reform, working together with student unions to try and reform the education system. I was involved in establishing the Federal Democratic Force and worked with Ko Mya Aye for peace and national reconciliation and ethnic rights. In addition, I co-founded the Nyan Media Group with colleagues and comrades, which is a news agency provides true information to build real peace, including on issues of equal rights and the self-determination of ethnic groups and for peace and national reconciliation. I worked there as Chief Executive Officer. I worked with civil society organizations and joined discussions and meetings with relevant *hluttaw* committees in Nay Pyi Taw to discuss amendments on freedom of association. I also worked with other social activities. Recently, I have been working with the Healthcare Center for Political Prisoners (HCPP). I worked with others including Ma Phyu Phyu Thin through this work at HCPP.