



## **Interview with Spring Revolution Student Leader Min Han Htet**

**Kaung Sithu**

### **Abstract**

In this June 2022 interview, Kaung Sithu asks student leader Min Han Htet about student unions, politics, the nature of revolution and the transition from peaceful to armed resistance since the 2021 military coup. Min Han Htet was elected to the Dagon University Student Union's Central Executive Committee in 2018 and to the position of chair in 2020. He co-founded the Student Armed Force in September 2021, the first student-based armed force since the founding of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) in 1988.

### **How do you understand the history and traditions of student unions in Myanmar?**

Although it can be said that student unions were born from universities, their birth was beautifully meaningful, since in their infancy they worked solely for revolution and independence. For me, I prefer to understand revolution as the primary reason that student unions emerged. Student unions also led anti-military dictatorship movements several times since independence. So, they have this high reputation in history. Most importantly, student unions have had consistency and integrity, meaning that student unions have actively participated in political movements over time much more consistently than any other group. The student unions are closer to the people and to students than other organizations. They represent the latter's voices. The student union has an unassailable tradition of always standing united alongside the oppressed in fighting against oppression.

## **Given that your parents and grandparents came from a political background, what was your early life like?**

There was nothing particularly unique or peculiar about my early life. I was not book-smart, I did not receive high grades at school. I was not good at sports either. Just an ordinary kid. But despite my lack of direct exposure to politics [outside the home] when I was young, I always heard about these things indirectly, through the bedtime stories I was told.

The 1988 uprisings are at the center of my parents' and grandparents' political experiences. I don't mean to brag, but my family has been involved in politics for a long time. You see, my father was a university student majoring in mathematics at the time of the 1988 uprisings. He participated in the revolution like many other people. In 1988 there were self-administration units formed by the people for each township, similar to at the beginning of the Spring Revolution in 2021. When these units were crushed, my father left the city to join the armed insurgency somewhere in southern Burma, but he was detained by the military in Mawlamyine Township and imprisoned. My mother, as a student at the Hlaing campus of Rangoon University, was involved in revolution awareness campaign activities such as distributing and posting papers. My grandfather was fired from his government position for participating in the 1988 uprising and joined the National League for Democracy. My parents also helped and supported the people during the 2007 Saffron Revolution.

## **At what age did you first comprehend what politics was and when were you first exposed to it?**

There was this one memorable event when I was young. The military was about to reconvene a 'National Convention' to draft what became the 2008 Constitution. At that time, the convention was all over the national television news daily, and I would watch it with my family. I thought it was nothing when the military generals attended the convention in traditional Bama

dress rather than in their military uniforms. But my parents' eyes were filled with resentment when they saw it. They frowned and tut-tutted in disappointment. I heard my father say, "We should have killed them all in 1988". In my naivety I thought, "Why is my father having murderous thoughts, is he a bad man?"

I still understood very little when the 2007 Saffron Revolution occurred. But I at least noticed political unrest here and there in Yangon; I knew something was going on. When I heard that the 'revolution' had risen, I thought, "What revolution?". I did not know why it had occurred. I remember monks going in and out of our house, lodging at our home, and our parents also donating things to them. I vividly remember my parents taking monks in and hiding them at our place when the military cracked down on them.

### **How about reading? What kind of books do you like to read?**

I love reading. I do not differentiate between categories, so long as I can access it, I will read it, ever since I was little, I would take and read the books from my parents' shelves. By the time I was in third or fourth grade, I started getting addicted to reading fiction. My father was a fan of writer Nyein Kyaw, so his shelf was filled with his books. My first exposure to literature was Nyein Kyaw's works. That was the beginning of my reading journey. After that, I started to read books written about university life, history books, biographies, and political texts. My father's bookshelf held books about politics. I remember the books were so old, some did not even have their original covers anymore; they would have this cardboard paper folded to contain the pages, with the names of the authors handwritten on them. Since then and until now I have read a lot.

## Were there any particular books that drew you into politics?

Not in terms of pushing me directly into politics, but there are books that fired my political interests. While written books are one form of stimulation, there are others too, such as what was passed down to me from my parents. The bedtime stories they told me when I was young were about the dark age they had to endure and their experiences, and this drew me into politics. In my childish thinking, I could imagine who the good guys and bad guys were. As I said, my parents participated in the 1988 uprising as students, my dad was imprisoned, they overcame all these ups and downs. It was quite tough for them. So, their stories, narratives, and their accounts provoked my interest in politics, it was like an inheritance gift from them.

Then, I read many stories about student unions and student movements, which had a significant influence on me ever since I was young. When I was in high school, I wanted to get in touch with a student union and work for them, proudly fighting for justice under their peacock flag. When we were young, there were not many books about politics that covered political ideology and such concepts. They were more about the student movements and student unions. Among them were the famous ones: အရှေ့ကနေဝန်းထွက်သည့်ပမာ (*As the Sun Rises from the East*)<sup>1</sup> and သပိတ်မှောက်ကျောင်းသား (*The Protest Student*).<sup>2</sup> We liked them a lot. We were hugely inspired. They had a powerful impact.

## How did you join the student union?

We students were exposed to literature, books, and stories, of university life and the student unions ever since we were young. I dig those kinds of stories and am addicted to them. To my mind, life as a university student and life as a member of the student union are inseparable and indistinguishable. I have desired to become a student union member ever since I was young, even before I went to university.

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But still, I did not go straight into the Dagon University Student Union (DUSU) when I started studying there. I first started working for other organizations, for instance, the Dagon University Reading Club. But during this time, I was interacting and relating with the student union. I had contact with the members and leaders. We would engage in dialogues and cooperate and collaborate. Then in 2018, I ran for the position of executive member in the DUSU elections.

Before that, when I was in high school, I was inquisitive about politics. I kind of stood out from my friends. They nicknamed me “future president” and teased me. I remember talking about politics and our country’s situation when we had conversations in high school. When I was about to sit for the matriculation exam in 2015, the police beat protesters and dispersed the pro-democracy student mass demonstration in Letpadan Township. When I heard the news, I told my parents that I no longer believed in the system and that I did not want to sit the exam. But my parents insisted that I did. We argued and quarreled. I had to attend university so that I could do more, they said. So even before going to university, the images of student unions, students’ battles, and the peacock flag had already been flashing in my mind.

**You were elected as an executive member of the DUSU in 2018 and then as chair in 2020. For what purposes did you run in these elections?**

Before running for election in 2018, I served as a focal person for literature and art in the DUSU. I had already worked with other union members on publishing an internal university journal and many other things related to literature. But honestly, I was not very satisfied with my efforts, we faced some challenges and difficulties. Something separating the DUSU from the student body, and perhaps the highest threat to the union in general, was the constant repercussions we suffered from the authorities. We could not do as much advocating for the students as we thought we needed to. These kinds of things. So, I began

thinking of a way to fix this and get the student union closer to the student body at Dagon University to truly, genuinely represent them.

Then when the opportunity arose, I ran for election, eventually becoming chair of the DUSU. My platform was very clear: to bring the student union closer to the students, as mentioned. I also felt like 2020 was an important, pivotal moment in Myanmar politics, and the time was right to run. There were national general elections planned and other political fluctuations, many other events like the COVID-19 pandemic. The DUSU Central Executive Committee (CEC) considered the national political situation all the time; there had been talk between CEC members about a potential military coup long before I joined.

### **What are your thoughts and views on student union elections themselves?**

Student union elections expose masses of students to the principles of democracy. Because of entrenched military rule in Myanmar, most students do not grow up in a democracy and lack experience with democratic elections and voting before they reach university. So, union elections are like their first experience of a democratic system where their votes are considered important. That is pretty much what a democratic system is about.

### **When you were chair of the DUSU, the students were not really in favor of the union. Why?**

That is true. When I was serving as chair, there was tension between the union and the students. The student union and the students were divided by espionage. This is one reason why I intended to bring the DUSU closer to its students. The reputation of the student union had been systematically sullied. There were a lot of such instances.

Then, the so-called ‘government’ began forming non-political students’ associations. While students have the right to

associate, this right has long been curtailed by the condition that “they must not be involved in any political affairs”. The authorities planted this ideology in the student body so deeply. It is immensely troublesome. It reached the point where students perceived the student union as not doing its job stepping outside its bounds, meaning, getting involved in politics.

The students needed motivation for political spirit and awareness. With such a vision, we can make our voices heard and stand together with the oppressed. Our voices at the DUSU were loud regarding ethnic affairs. But instead of following our example, the students would say, “We need to just do our jobs as students” and, “Politics will be handled by the political parties” ... like that. These waves crashed over us student union members hard. Difficult times. The separation dividing the DUSU from the student body lasted for quite a long time. We could not fix it easily. But since the military coup of 2021, the DUSU and its students have become more united in the revolution. All the students can unanimously stand under the peacock flag. They can now follow the leadership of the student union. So, while there were some very real rough patches in the relations between the students and the union, in times of urgency, the students and the student union are united.

### **What did you do for the Dagon University campus as chair of the DUSU before the coup?**

The campus is a very important part of the life of a university student. By campus, I mean a lot of things: educational affairs, freedom of association and expression, for instance. But if we think only of the physical infrastructure at Dagon University, we can say that it is weak. Someone without experience would be mesmerized by the way, for example, an alumnus of Yangon University describes its campus in a book about their student life, because good memories of the campus greatly influence the mind. It has seductive power. Unfortunately, the environment and infrastructure of Dagon University could cast no such spell. Conditions are extremely poor.



We tried to change that. But before we could think about how to transform the campus into a place to create memories and develop the university, we had to deal with corruption and bribery. It was like a disease. I do not mean that the time when I was in the DUSU was all bad, or necessarily worse than what came before, for corruption and bribery has always been part of Burmese society—but we were in what was supposedly an age of democracy. I could not really see it that way. Corruption existed even in this ‘democracy’.

Authorities would allocate money in the university budget—for building and road construction, for example, but the allocated funding would not reach its intended purpose, due to the rampant corruption. The DUSU tried to object to this. Boy, did we ever. However, this bad habit that has been perpetuated for decades could not be expunged in just a year. We simply could not achieve that. We tried as much as we could to prevent bribery and fraud and advocated for the construction of buildings and roads, for the safety of the students, for instance. There were no pedestrian lanes and platforms on the side of the roads, and it was very dangerous for students. The student union did a lot of work to push for increased road safety.

And that is all to do with just the physical infrastructure part of the university campus. The other part of the campus is the rights enjoyed by students, as I said. This is of great importance. The university had safety and security issues such as women and gender issues; sexual harassment and gender-based violence against female students, etc. Our student union did as much as it could to tackle these issues, for example, our executive members worked with the Women’s Affairs Committee for the rights of students. During my term as chair, I received such complaints daily. The DUSU had to intervene and refer more serious cases to the university administration or responsible authorities. A lot of work went into protecting the rights of both male and female students, in general.

Another part of the campus is ‘educational affairs’—also very important. Being university students and learners ourselves, we could suggest how to advance education standards

and outcomes, like bringing in academics and experts and identifying what needed to change. That included pursuing equality of educational opportunities for all. The DUSU worked for it. Our student union strongly upheld its principles and values, and we tried our best within our capacity to contribute to the development of our educational system.

### **What do you think was the main reason for the 2021 military coup d'état?**

The military dictatorship still existed before the coup, which as an event was just the reawakening and resurgence of the still-powerful military. I see it that way. I mean, we Burmese have had generations and generations of activism and several revolutions aimed at eradicating the military dictatorship. But these revolutions never reached their goals. They always fell short, and the military dictatorship has endured. The recent 2021 military coup is just the next chapter in the story of dictatorship written by the military. That is my view.

### **How did you feel on 1 February 2021 when you heard the coup had taken place?**

When I first heard the news, it was like 3 a.m. My friends woke me up with a phone call and told me to flee. The first thing that came to my mind was my family. I talked to them and said I had to be a part of the anti-military dictatorship revolution and that I could get arrested or killed. We discussed it and they finally said, "Okay, go on if you must". We in the DUSU CEC had expected the coup and had discussed the likelihood of one happening several times. The military's speech, supposedly ruling out a coup, just days before they did it, actually only affirmed our expectation. That is pretty much it.

## **How did you prepare to resist the coup on the ground? Please share your experiences.**

Since the day of the coup, all student unions took precautions to maintain contact between themselves and between corresponding members and made efforts to communicate regularly. The DUSU began distributing papers and information sheets across Yangon, in the streets and in the markets, on 2 February. Some of the messages we shared were, “The military dictatorship must fail”, “Drive the military away from politics”, and “Let everyone participate in anti-military dictatorship movements.” CEC and regular members worked all night printing and cutting them.

Our second task was to prepare for the emergence of a mass public movement. We engaged in dialogue with the labor unions, the student unions, and teachers and lecturers that said they would participate in the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). We discussed students protesting on campus with other student unions. We said the revolutionary wave should start with the universities and that students needed to make it happen. At Dagon University, this began to happen on 5 February. University lecturers joined the CDM and hundreds of students from Dagon University started protesting. Following that, as we all know, mass demonstrations on the streets began to break out with millions of people.

## **Could you explain the story behind your famous quote, “We must instill fear into the military”?**

Honestly, I never wrote any prepared speeches for going out protesting or planned to talk about fear. Normally I would just give spontaneous speeches on the spot, either on top of a car or on a table or someplace high. The quote you mentioned, I think I came up with it, but I do not remember anymore.

We must see this coup as an opportunity. Our nation has problems that cannot be resolved under dictatorship, and its people are trapped by suffering and complex problems. The military dictatorship thrives in our country, the army still

interferes in politics, and the 2008 Constitution still lives. There are also a lot of active sanctions which cannot be resolved by political means, not even by the Hluttaw parliament. In the past we had these issues, but we could not do anything. Ethnic areas also faced vast conflicts, wars, and oppressions; we could not do anything. But the 2021 coup has given birth to a revolution driven by people of all classes and statuses. This revolution could pour in new blood to build a new nation. So, I see the coup as an opportunity. The military is digging its own grave by staging this coup.

When I said, “we must instill fear into the military”, some people did not like it. Maybe because back then it was a very difficult time for this revolution. A bit like that. When we refer to the ‘military’ and ‘instilling fear’ into their minds; it means their whole institution, from the soldiers on the ground to those at the top of the command chain. It must be understood that the army can be obliterated by the people’s combined force and strength. And we need to make it happen. If we can truly separate the military from the revolutionary public, we will see who the nation’s real enemy is. We need to identify every individual underpinning the army and every soldier as a common enemy. In the time of my public speeches, we were not even thinking about a full armed revolution, it was too early. Since then, we thought we needed to employ more psychological warfare against them. I mean, it is good to demonstrate humanity and empathy toward soldiers and police but on the other hand, I do not appreciate it as a tactic of revolution. That is why I pushed for instilling fear into the minds of the military, clearly seeing the enemy for what it is. This rule still applies as the peaceful revolution transforms into an armed one.

The military is driven by greed and is composed of, basically, enforcers. They are not fighting for a righteous purpose. They will tremble, disintegrate, and fall into pieces once their hands go empty, their bellies go hungry, or their minds go craven. That is what I believe. We need to make continuous efforts to instill such fear into their minds. They need to be threatened by the strength of the people. Let’s look at all the revolutions of

different times across the world. Weren't the militarily weaker forces fighting and winning against the stronger? Why? Because the stronger had the weaker spirit. There were situations where military personnel put their weapons down and surrendered instead of joining a firefight against the people. For us to reach that situation, fear must be driven into the minds of the military. And to stimulate such fear, we need to demonstrate the unity of the people, and the strength of the people. We need to build such powerful unity among the people, like one strong arrow that will penetrate right into their beating hearts. Only such unity will bring fear into the minds of the military.

**You say the peaceful Spring Revolution has morphed into an armed revolution. Why did that happen? What is your opinion on peaceful vs. armed revolution?**

There are numerous factors influencing and shaping the revolution right now. Yes, non-violence has transformed into armed revolution, due to both the given circumstances and the people's will. If you look back at the history of Myanmar's revolutions, we achieved victory through armed revolution. We had to undertake an armed revolution for the nation's independence. And the same examples exist if you look at revolutions across the world. I think all the youths, students and other people need to believe and have faith in the path of armed revolution and continue this fight. There's one caveat, however: we need to be more disciplined in order to sustain the armed revolution. What I mean by that is, holding a deadly weapon in one's hand should never feel like a burden, and the trigger of these weapons should never be pulled toward the people. Arms should be used solely by the people, for the people. and their ultimate interest. We need to keep that in mind always.

As we walk down this path of armed revolution, wisdom must guide us. Political principles and political leadership must lead us. Strong and well-founded organizations must lead us. And we need to be very, very careful about this. Our feeling is a very important motivating force too. I mean, we need a fire

inside us, to ignite the flames of the revolution. The feeling of resentment; the feeling, passion, and longing for truth and justice. This is vital. However, as we walk down this path, we require not only our ‘feelings’, but also our ‘guiding principles’, to be able to continue this journey without deviation. The armed revolution should be a fusion of our ‘feelings’ with our ‘guiding principles’. It is important to cultivate not only our firm desire to free this land and achieve democracy but also, the guiding principle that an armed revolution should never be a burden for the people. As simple as that.

### **Do you believe this armed revolution will win eventually?**

I do. I believe this armed revolution will bring victory for us. That is why we all keep fighting. But there are a lot of lessons to learn from the history of our country’s revolutions. Mistakes were made during previous armed revolutions.

We must never forget the power within the nation. What I mean by that is that there are many ethnic rebellious forces in this country. Unity must be built among all these different ethnic groups. There is a kind of unity to an extent, currently. But like I said, a stronger and more resilient form of unity is like an arrow that will penetrate right into the enemy’s heart. We need to keep building and reinforcing such unity. We need to learn from our mistakes, prevent such mistakes from happening again, build unity among people of all classes, and then the armed revolution will be victorious.

### **It is said that student unions want to build a post-revolution nation. What does that look like?**

The new nation that we envision is very simple actually. To build a society that respects each other’s freedom, rights, and has justice. This is the very foundation we are poking at, in general. To elaborate, our country has many different and diverse people and ethnicities. Different cultures, different languages, different

religions. It is not an easy task to bring harmony and unity among these different people in building a union. We must try very hard. The prolonged civil wars are also rooted in the problem of how to constitute a nation, and how to build a union. In other words, civil wars are created based on the constitution and structure of the nation. Bloodsheds, fights, and conflicts. For the nation to be reborn, we need a system that resolves all these problems among different people of all ethnicities; and a system that prevents these problems from occurring again in the future. That can be either a union, federal or not; or maybe, even a ‘confederation’ with more decentralization. But at this time, it is difficult to consistently name what kind of system there needs to be. We will keep moving toward nation-building based on the common acceptance of people of all ethnicities. Everyone should come together and do so, not because they are forced to, but because they are willing to. We must learn from the past and learn from our mistakes. We will need to build a system within the nation that prevents conflicts between our ethnic brothers and sisters. We must base the nation on a common agreement between all the people living on this land and in this water. That is the new nation we envision.

### **Who do you admire in politics?**

I admire the student leader Ko Ba Hein, who had a great influence on me. I love his humanity. And I like his stance; his humility and closeness to the people; his spirit of unity with the people.<sup>3</sup> Students and youths have been and are a major force in the

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<sup>3</sup> Thakin Ba Hein (1917-1946) was one of the founding members of the Communist Party of Burma and is a widely respected student leader who played important roles in Burma’s struggle for independence despite his relatively short life. He was well loved and remembered by his colleagues and friends and regarded as an inspiring icon for the generations of student activists to come, known for his charisma, camaraderie, kind composure, as well as the ability to deliver fiery speeches. His words “*At one strike of the horse hoof, there will be burning fire*” from the speech given on 12 December 1938 in Magway provoked the anti-colonial spirits nationwide. For more information about Ba Hein, see: ဒဂုန်တဘရာနှင့်အများ၊ ၂၀၁၄။

revolutions against dictatorship—from the days of the Thirty Comrades of the first generation, to the 1988 All Burma Students' Democratic Front of the second generation, to the current anti-military dictatorship student youths as the third generation.

### **What are the differences between these three generations?**

There are a lot of differences between the armed revolution for independence, the 1988-armed revolution, and the Spring Revolution. Perhaps the most important is that people participated in the war for independence because they accepted that war was imminent anyway; and that war was required for the revolution to achieve independence and freedom. Participating in revolutionary war does not mean all the people have to get armed and everything. The people must show support for the revolutionary war and provide support, all these kinds of things. We have witnessed such a form of holistic participation during the struggle for independence and during the ongoing Spring Revolution too.

In the armed revolution following 1988, while people showed their support, their participation, the idea of going into a full-on war was not very popular and there was a lot of hesitation. But this is just my opinion, of course. In the ongoing Spring Revolution, our strength comes from forces within the country, from people of different ethnicities. Moreover, we can see today that the people do not try to avoid war but instead actively participate and support it—they willingly accept that war is required and essential for the revolution, and the freedom of all. That is why we said, “we are living at an age when the anti-military dictatorship spirit is at its climax”.

During the struggle for independence, the Thirty Comrades received help from foreign countries. This caused unwanted negative consequences. We had to fight against fascism again, and the period of the war was stretched out and lengthened. Also, after winning the revolution, those from the Burma Independence Army who were involved in the armed revolution



ended up becoming the nation's leaders; and those with beliefs in militarism ended up as military dictators.

### **What should be done to prevent the emergence of another generation of military dictators during and after this current revolution?**

Every armed revolution must remain under political civilian leadership. The perpetuation of military dictatorship in Myanmar began with a military army formed for an armed revolution. Their thirst for power turned them into a fascist group. And the people had to face them again. Everyone participating in the current armed revolution must learn from this lesson. It is critical. Political leadership and political awareness mean knowing clearly and exactly why we are armed, and why we are partaking in this revolution. The fact that we are armed should not burden the people. This is a lifeline. The leaders from each of the current armed revolutionary groups and political organizations must lead in providing military and political training for armed comrades and revolutionaries. Raising their political awareness is essential. It is a must.

### **What are your plans after the revolution?**

In this revolution, many students had to make sacrifices—their formal education, life with their families and loved ones. They sacrificed their precious personal time. I think post-revolution, we need to compensate for this lost time—being together with the family; living the easygoing and carefree life of a youth; spending quality time happily with friends on the university campus. I think those times will come for me to enjoy as well.

### **Is there anything you would like to add?**

Revolution is extremely, vitally important. Our country is now undergoing a revolution that could overturn this whole system. The spirit of revolution is needed in every member of our society

so it can develop positively. I believe, through this revolution, we will be able to resolve all the political conflicts and crises that have long existed in our country for many years. And then our nation will be reborn. So, let all the people and students see this revolution as an opportunity.

We must grab this opportunity and continue moving forward until we reach the final destination, the rebirth of the nation.

### References

ဒဂုန်တာရာနှင့်အများ၊ (၂၀၁၄)။ ဗဟိန်းသို့မဟုတ်ကဗျာ၊  
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