

Myanmar: Protests continue despite fierce military repression

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Over two months since the coup by the Myanmar military on February 1, violence and mass arrests by the junta have failed to stem protests calling for the reinstatement of the democratically-elected government.

According to the activist group Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), at least 16 people were reported killed over the Easter weekend bringing the total to 564, while a further 299 were given arrest warrants. These numbers are likely higher due to an almost-complete internet blackout in the country.

Following a surge of violence in the final weekend of March, which saw 169 civilians killed including 14 children, anti-coup demonstrations have reportedly become smaller and shorter.

On Saturday, security forces in Monywa reportedly opened fire on pro-democracy protests killing at least four people and wounding several more.

Speaking to Reuters via a messaging app, one unnamed protester said, “They started firing non-stop with both stun grenades and live rounds. People backed off and quickly put up... barriers but a bullet hit a person in front of me, in the head. He died on the spot.”

According to the *Bago Weekly Journal*, an online news site, a man was shot and killed in the southern town of Thaton, while another was wounded by police in the southern town of Bago.

In the largest city of Yangon, demonstrators held an “Easter Egg Strike,” chanting protests and decorating eggs with anti-coup slogans, including “Spring Revolution.” Early Monday morning, demonstrators in the second largest city of Mandalay called for the release of deposed leader Aung San Suu Kyi and for international intervention.

Killing by the junta has been wanton and

indiscriminate. It was reported last week by the non-government organisation, Save the Children, that at least 43 children have been killed by armed forces in Myanmar since the start of the coup. The youngest known victim was six years old.

Raids have also been conducted against hospitals. On March 30, the security forces raided Sanpya hospital and other hospitals in Yangon. Many lost the right to treatment as the junta prepared to arrest patients in advance. Pinnya Alin Library, which was converted into a makeshift medical centre, was also destroyed, leading to further deaths.

A third member of Suu Kyi’s deposed National League for Democracy (NLD) was also allegedly tortured to death by security forces in Naypyidaw. U Kyaw Kyaw, an executive member of the NLD’s branch in the capital’s Zabuthiri Township, died on March 30.

Censorship escalated Friday with wireless broadband providers ordered to end their services. This follows the ending of mobile networks and public wifi earlier in March in a bid to block the organisation of and reporting on protests. Only those with fibre networks installed have access to the internet, and that at significantly reduced speeds.

At least 56 journalists have reportedly been arrested and charged under draconian state-security laws. Local news outlets are still suspended.

Under these repressive conditions, a CNN news team arrived in Myanmar on the invitation of the military which is desperate to counter negative international press coverage. In a carefully managed tour, CNN news correspondent Clarissa Ward was escorted throughout Yangon on the weekend by a military convoy.

The day prior to the arrival of the CNN team, a leaked memo signed by police Maj Myo Khine Oo

stated:

“Every stage of the process must be done step-by-step in accordance with [riot control] procedures, and responsible officers at all levels need to supervise police to ensure that they do not go beyond [these] limits.”

The directive was confirmed as genuine to the website *Myanmar Now* by dissidents in the police force.

Speaking on condition of anonymity, an ex-military officer explained, “It is obvious. When CNN was present, security forces were on hidden sentry duty. Soldiers and police were kept as invisible as possible.”

Vendors and local residents also confirmed a heavy police presence although most were not in uniform.

In the wake of the CNN team, locals who were approached at random and questioned have subsequently been detained by security forces. On Friday in Mingaladon Market, five people were taken into custody by plainclothes officers.

One witness reported two young women being taken away. “The two girls were shouting, wanting to know why they had been arrested. They also asked why nobody was helping them. The officer asked if anybody dared to help them. He said it in a “threatening manner,” said the witness, who added that the officer was carrying a gun.

The lack of press coverage has meant the significant delays in reporting important strikes by workers.

Reports emerged only last week of a critical strike by hundreds of skilled workers at military-owned factories, taking part in anti-coup demonstrations beginning on March 7. Responsible for making military vehicle parts, the workers are employed in five factories across the country including Yangon, Magway, Myaing, Myingyan and Htone Bo.

According to *Myanmar Now*, at least 193 workers at the Htone Bo plant said they were striking, roughly a third of the workforce. Sixty-five were confirmed in Magway, 34 in Myaing but involvement at the rest is unclear. The strikes, though small, were highly significant as they had the potential to spread and to undermine military control of the country. They were only partially dissipated by the military leadership and the personal intervention of Major General Ko Ko Lwin, vice chief of Defence Industries.

According to the *Irrawaddy*, reprisals have begun

taking place against police stations and administrative offices in cities and towns throughout the country. In late March, more than two dozen were attacked by incendiary devices and hand grenades, and 21 members of security forces were either killed or injured in the attacks.

Protesters have continued to show considerable courage and determination in the face of the junta’s bloody repression. However, the limited character of their demands—the reinstatement of Suu Kyi’s NLD government that has collaborated closely with military and defended its crimes against the Rohingya—acts as an impediment to the broad involvement of workers.

A struggle for democratic rights necessarily has to be based not on appeals to the “international community”—that is, the major imperialist powers—but to the working class on the basis of fighting for its basic social rights and a decent standard of living that Suu Kyi and the NLD are incapable of addressing. That signifies a political struggle based on a socialist perspective.



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