

EAI Commentary

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The Uninterrupted Struggle of Myanmar's Civil Society for Democracy: Reflections on EAI's Myanmar Cooperation Project

Young-Hwan Shin (Peace and Democracy Institute)

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On February 1, 2021, another tragedy of history was captured, rather comedically, on the video camera of an aerobics instructor in Naypyidaw, the capital of Myanmar. The video shows a series of vehicles driven by the military entering the Federal Parliament to take control. Because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the aerobics instructor is wearing a mask and performing a series of youthful movements. While the camera was focused on 2021, the motorcade in the background was strongly reminiscent of 1962 and 1988.

The history of democracy in Myanmar has been one of setbacks. Even when colonial rule was undone and an independent government was established, it was not possible to overcome the incompetence of the government and the divisive political and social environment, resulting in the military regime's usurpation of power. The 8888 Uprising of 1988, which was a civil resistance movement against the incompetence and corruption of the military dictatorship, and the 2007 Saffron Revolution, joined by the Buddhist monks, were both thwarted in less than two months due to the military's violent suppression tactics. Myanmar's military has become a professional coup organization, taking power with ease in the name of restoring national integration and order, and leaving those who spill blood or give their lives in civil resistance with the trauma of frustration. Democracy and freedom have only been possible to a limited degree when practiced with "discipline" as a "benefit" given by the military.

But the desire of Myanmar's citizens for democracy has not been so easily thwarted. Although many democratic activists have been imprisoned or made political exiles along the way, civil society built up its internal capacity as it waited for the opportunity to end the military dictatorship and win freedom. That opportunity came in 2015. The National League for Democracy (NLD), led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, overwhelmed Thein Sein's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) in the November

general election, finally bringing an end to a long history of military dictatorship. More than 75% of eligible voters cast a vote in the election, and the will of a united civil society led to a political victory through the democratic process.

However, it appears that it has not been as easy for the military to usurp power in the 2021 coup as it was in the past, and the coup thus remains unfinished. Civil resistance, although reduced in comparison to the beginning of the coup, continues in the streets of major cities like Yangon and Mandalay. This is a tactical shift in civil resistance to be able to respond quickly to violent suppression, such as shooting at protesters. Myanmar's support for the National Unity Government (NUG), which seeks to be the centerpiece of restoring democracy, is broad and nationwide. All bonds issued to fund NUG's activities were purchased within ten hours. Of course they didn't expect to profit. This was rather a reflection of the desire of Myanmar's people for the restoration of democracy.

Currently, there is a tense, ongoing battle between Myanmar's military, which is bent on maintaining its grip on power through indiscriminate violence, and the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) and the democratic faction, which is preparing opportunities for democracy restoration and sending continued messages of resistance.

1. The 2015 General Election and Challenges for Civil Society in Myanmar

In 2015, Myanmar's civil society was quietly preparing for a historic opportunity. In accordance with Thein Sein's liberalization policies, democratization activists who had been imprisoned were released, and dissidents who had been exiled abroad and supported the domestic resistance movement returned home. These forward-looking liberalization policies relaxed the military's control, and past democracy activists sought out new ways to promote Myanmar's political development within civil society.

Their homeland had changed. In the last remaining land of potential on the Indochina Peninsula, foreign capital investment flooded in, providing new momentum to the economy that had previously been solely reliant on China. Myanmar's residents also quickly adapted to the ever-changing telecommunications technologies, actively forming social networks in cyberspace. The old style of going out into the streets, holding pickets,

and shouting into a megaphone no longer appealed to Myanmar's changed civil society. Democracy activists knew that Myanmar's civil society needed to develop its capacity so that it could seize and develop democratic opportunities. This is because they knew that reliance on a small number of political leaders could not guarantee democratic development and achievements.

They took note of the general election scheduled for November 2015. If it were held as the government promised, it would be a golden opportunity to end the dictatorship of the military and establish a democratic civil government. This would require the active participation of citizens who had the right to vote. Civil society groups banded together and organized voting education for the people of Myanmar ahead of the general elections. Civil society groups organized by democracy activists toured the country, providing voting education for citizens everywhere. The general elections, which covered not only Federal Parliament but also the local parliaments of mid-tier regional areas, were a complex and difficult challenge for ordinary citizens to grasp, as they were not often given the opportunity to vote. This is why they needed training and demonstrations to understand how to do so. Civil society organizations visited small villages and large cities alike as they crossed the country offering voting education. The combination of a high literacy rate and a strong desire for democracy among the populace increased the effectiveness of this education. The high turnout in the general elections was thanks to the sweat of the Myanmar civil society activists who circulated throughout the country in 2015.

These democracy activists and the civil society organizations they founded could not imagine the challenges that would lie before them following the election. The advocacy or activist groups of the past could not play a meaningful role as they did in the past. It was necessary to consider what roles and responsibilities could contribute to this historical opportunity to achieve democracy. It was against this backdrop that the East Asia Institute (EAI), together with local civil society organizations in Myanmar, promoted the strengthening of civil society in the country. The aim of this program was to transform Myanmar's civil society organizations into think tanks that were capable of leading the development of a democratic agenda and facing policy challenges while contributing to the development of democracy in Myanmar.

The program operated on two major axes. The first was the sharing of

experiences. The people of Myanmar were very curious about South Korea's experiences with democracy and political development, as well as its economic success. In addition, EAI's experience as a small, private, independent think tank that has become influential not only in Korea but also throughout the world has made EAI a realistic reference point for Myanmar's civil society organizations as they map the direction of their future organizational development. However, this sharing was not a unilateral transmission of knowledge and experiences. EAI also needed to understand and explore this country, as it wanted to go one step forward for its research scope to the Southeast Asian region of political and economic potentials. Since its independence, the outside world has not been able to learn much about the rich history and information about the political and economic challenges and social issues experienced by modern Myanmar. EAI sought to expand its research into democracy in Asia based on an in-depth understanding of Myanmar's politics and society. Recognizing the problem that Korea's support for developing countries remains largely economic, EAI tried to find a model case in Myanmar where the civilian contribution diplomacy of South Korea, the only country in the world to have made the shift from an ODA beneficiary to a donor, could have a practical impact by sharing experiences.

The second axis was EAI's global network. EAI has sought to expand its success story at the regional and global levels by constructing a network with itself as the hub and major experts and other organizations as nodes. At the regional level, EAI built and continues to lead the Asia Democracy Research Network (ADRN), a network of democratic think tanks created to respond to democratic crises and discover research agendas. Using these experiences as a foundation, EAI first established a democratic research network within Myanmar and then acted as a bridge to connect this network to the broader regional Asian network, thereby establishing a framework to enhance the capacity of democracy in Myanmar and the civil society that underpins it. Just as human beings grow through mutual exchanges within a society, Myanmar's civil society organizations have also established channels of mutual exchange, and have become able to develop their communication channels with think tanks in other parts of Asia by participating in EAI's established network in the region.

We held our first workshop to share experiences and discuss policy research in

August 2015. In the interim, the NLD, led by Aung San Suu Kyi, achieved victory in Myanmar's historic elections and established a democratic civilian government. The following year, South Korea launched a candlelight protest and brought down the government lacking in accountability through the power of the people. EAI and its partner institutions in Myanmar shared vivid accounts of the historical experience of democracy in each country.

2. Civic Aspirations and the Limits of the NLD Government

In the latter 2010s, Myanmar's civil society grew in leaps and bounds. Here, the efforts of democratic figures were key in developing the capacity of civil society. Following the 8888 Uprising, the military closed down Yangon University since it had been the center of the student movement. In addition, higher education in any field outside medicine and technology, such as humanities or social science topics, was either extremely limited or prohibited altogether. The military coveted the autonomy of power even as it sought to deprive its people of the right to education. Myanmar's civil society worked to compensate for the deprivation of the right to education in the midst of this partial freedom.

This is one example of the primary work that EAI did with its partner institutions in Myanmar. Sandhi Governance Institute ran a women's leadership program aimed at empowering the next generation of women to become leaders in Myanmar. The Yangon School of Political Science revived political science education at the civic level, which the military had banned from being taught at public universities. The Open Myanmar Initiative built a database of politicians and maintained current data on the government and parliament, and played the role of providing such data to the public and to both domestic and overseas researchers. The Yone Kyi Yar Knowledge Propagation Society, founded by young doctors in Mandalay, established a library to spread knowledge in the community and create an arena for constructive discussion for the young generation. The Naushawng Development Institute, located in Myitkyina, the capital of Kachin State, has been operating a school in cooperation with overseas NGOs to provide educational opportunities for young people from ethnic minority groups who have been marginalized from public

education services.

As the voting education of civil society organizations conducted throughout the country in 2015 paid off, their activities to strengthen civil society capacity gained momentum. The Myanmar Democracy Research Network (MDRN), with its connection to a network of think tanks across Asia, learned success stories from overseas and developed them into a domestic agenda. Democracy experts and scholars from Asia and the rest of the world visited Yangon to share their knowledge and experience, and were able to communicate readily through the social network. Ahead of the 2020 general election, these groups conducted more systematic voting education compared to the efforts of five years ago. There were numerous constraints due to the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, but even so, these organizations were able to successfully complete their research projects, polling the people of Myanmar.

However, the NLD government, which had initially appeared carrying democratic aspirations, failed to respond sufficiently to democratic challenges. When conflict arose between the vested interests of the military and the democratic demands of the people, they turned their backs on democratic values. Perhaps this was due to a fear that the military would once again snatch power from their grasp, or because of the characteristics of the political elite, but either way they appeared to have struck a strategic partnership with the military. The channels of communication between members of civil society and MPs, which had been guaranteed even under Thein Sein, did not function properly, and the government sought to regulate and manage the free activities of civil society organizations and overseas NGOs. The NLD remained silent on the violence perpetrated by the military against the Rohingya. Political expression on campus was prohibited, freedom of expression was not guaranteed, student movement leaders were arrested, and measures were taken against minorities to further restrict their right to vote and ability to run for office compared to 2015. COVID-19 was used as a pretext to ban campaigning and prohibit free media coverage ahead of the 2020 elections. Only state broadcasts were legally allowed. The criticism that the NLD had become a "democratic dictatorship" was not an exaggeration.

Despite having gained generous public confidence with an overwhelming victory in the 2020 general election, the NLD government, lacking any political assets other than

public support, folded quietly in the face of the military coup. Once again, the citizens were left holding the challenge of history.

Thus far, many people have lost their lives resisting the military coup. As of December 25, 2021, the official death toll had reached 1,375. 8,254 people have been imprisoned, and 39 of those have been sentenced to death. Two minors under the age of 18 are on death row. Of course, these are the official figures, and there is speculation that the number of innocent civilians who have been sacrificed is far greater.

Civil disobedience in Myanmar has taken a variety of forms. In the early days, large crowds formed the center of the protests, and each night people would bang pots and pans to send a message of resistance. They also turned the lights off for a certain period each night to show the world a darkened Myanmar via satellite and communicate their willingness to resist. As the military continued to brutally suppress protests, protesters switched to flash mobs, creating guerrilla demonstrations that coalesced and disappeared in an instant. They protested by leaving stuffed bears in the streets in place of humans. They wrote "We Want Democracy" in huge letters that could be seen by anyone flying overhead, and shared images of people making the three-finger salute on Facebook.

Along with the demonstrations, the CDM against the military regime has continued to spread. In the early days, boycotts of industrial goods produced by military-owned businesses were common. Currently, people are refusing to pay taxes in order to financially pressure the military regime. The failure to pay electricity bills to the government has begun causing widespread power outages, but the public is willing to put up with the inconvenience of no longer being able to use electricity for the time being. Despite the spread of COVID-19, the public no longer has any expectations that the government will protect their health and safety. Public services are paralyzed, and citizens are fending for themselves. As the CDM continues in an attempt to deal a blow against the military, the gap between the government and civil society has become unbridgeable.

The people of Myanmar have continued to appeal to the international community to support the restoration of democracy in the country. The courageous declaration of Myanmar's ambassador to the UN and the tearful appeal of Miss Myanmar in the Miss Universe beauty pageant remain vivid in the minds of many people the world over. Nevertheless, the international community, including the UN, has only reiterated their

declarations regarding Myanmar and failed to implement any practical measures to relieve the suffering of the people there. China is effectively backing Min Aung Hlaing's regime, and ASEAN has also faced criticism for recognizing the military as Myanmar's official representative. Recently, Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen visited Naypyidaw to greet Min Aung Hlaing. Democracies have taken no practical measures in response. Myanmar's citizens have stopped making the tearful appeals to the UN and international community that they did several months ago. The idleness of the global community while Myanmar struggles has been a costly lesson. The people of Myanmar are fighting a battle that no one else is going to fight for them.

3. Epilogue

It's been a year since the military took control of Naypyidaw. Still, the situation in Myanmar shows no signs of resolution. The military continues to perpetrate merciless violence on vulnerable ethnic minorities and innocent civilians. The NUG has not yet gathered sufficient strength and resources to do anything about it. Protests by the citizenry have continued unabated on the streets of the cities, with some young people taking up arms. The doctors in Mandalay, members of MDRN, are leading peaceful citizen protests in Mandalay. An ethnic minority student who dreamed of a federalist Myanmar told that he has joined the revolutionary army. Meanwhile, a young couple has given birth to a child, while a new couple announced the news of their impending marriage. The resistance, which has been dubbed the Spring Revolution, has not faltered in the slightest. In the midst of this harsh revolution, life continues for the people of Myanmar. May the moment when history is on their side come a day sooner. ■

■ **Young-Hwan Shin** is an Affiliated Researcher at the Peace and Democracy Institute in Korea University and the General Manager in the Daegu Women and Family Foundation. He took a Ph.D of political science at the Department of Political Science and International Relations in Korea University. His research interest includes peace and security on the Korean peninsula and in East Asian region with traditional and non-traditional approaches, geopolitics, and international cooperation for development. He was a senior research fellow at the East Asia Institute based in Seoul, South Korea, where he participated in research projects which covered inter-Korean relations, ROK-US alliance, developmental cooperation in Myanmar. Recent publications include "Myanmar's Broken Democracy "Disciplined" by the Military: Analysis on the Quality of Procedure in Fledging Democracy"(2022), "China's Asymmetric Approaches on Land and on Sea: An Analysis Based on Nicholas Spykman's Geopolitical Theory"(2021), "Is Japan the "Britain" of East Asia? A Geopolitical Analysis of Japan's Long-term Strategy on the Korean Peninsula"(2020), etc.

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Typeset by Juhyun Jun

For inquiries:

Juhyun Jun, Research Associate

Tel. 82 2 2277 1683 (ext. 204) jhjun@eai.or.kr

The East Asia Institute
#909 Sampoong B/D, Eulji-ro 158, Jung-gu,
Seoul 04548, South Korea
Phone 82 2 2277 1683 Fax 82 2 2277 1697
Email eai@eai.or.kr Website www.eai.or.kr