

EAI Commentary

Myanmar Special Series ④

The Shared Experiences of Myanmar's Democratic Movement and Korean Civil Society

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Myanmar's democratic movement, ignited by the military coup has been more than a year by now. As of January 16, 2022, 1,469 people have been killed, more than 11,554 have been arrested, and warrants have been issued for 1,966. However, the number of victims on the ground far exceeds these figures. Although a year has passed, the situation doesn't seem to be improving. The people of Myanmar face numerous difficulties in their isolation.

1. The Irreversibility of the Democratic Movement and the Current Status of the Civil War

At the conference hosted by Est Asia Institute (EAI) on April 16, 2021 titled "The Military Coup and Future of Democracy in Myanmar," I summarized the nature of the democracy movement in Myanmar in four words: irreversibility, omnidirectional, convergence, and interactive. Since the country began to open up in 2010, the desire of Myanmar's people for change has led to rapid development, and the spread of mobile phones and the internet, like in other developing countries, transformed the public into global citizens who are up to date with international trends. While information was a driving force in development, it also served as a factor in the coup, as the military feared the flow of history and changing times. Despite this, the people of Myanmar are unable to return to the previous era of military dictatorship. Their willingness to spend a year risking their lives in protest illustrates this. One of my friends in Myanmar put it this way. "What the people of Myanmar want right now is not democracy. It is the end of the military. We won't simply accept the military's efforts to stop the democratic movement, and we cannot accept their desire to return to the state we were in before. Because of the incomplete 2008 Constitution, there is no choice but to give half of the power to the military. That

means that this will happen over and over again. We will keep fighting until the military is defeated." For the people of Myanmar, the current struggle has become a fight for their lives, not just a slogan demanding that the military provide democracy.

In response to the military's continued violence against civilians on top of the coup itself, the democratic faction, including the NLD, formed an alliance with the major ethnic groups, and the situation has now descended into civil war. On April 16, the ethnic groups from each region joined together to form the democratic National Unity Government (NUG) and a revolutionary army. Externally, the purpose of this was to unite Myanmar's democratic camp and represent Myanmar in the international community, neutralizing the legitimacy of the military. Internally, peaceful protests became impossible even in large cities like Yangon, and support from the international community through internet communication could not be counted on. This forced the desperate choice to protect the safety of the people in response to the military's violence, which went beyond suppressing protests to slaughter and terrorism.

Armed struggle erupted between the military and the Chin and spread to Kayah, Rakhine, and Karen territories. There is already a civil war happening in every state. In response to the armed struggle in each of these areas, the military has launched fighter jets and continues to engage in air strikes using helicopters. It has become routine to hear gunshots and explosions in the villages where ordinary citizens live. The military is trying to use its overwhelming military power to raid armed areas, find and arrest soldiers, and destroy armed forces. The Chin are considered to have the strongest military power among the major ethnic groups, and Chin Autonomous State, which was the first to engage in armed struggle, has been subjected to significant suppression. As one example, in a village in Thantlang comprising 1,600 households, more than 1,300 were destroyed by military bombing. In addition, sporadic guerrilla protests and ruthless responses continue throughout the country. In December, the military drove their vehicles into a small protest of 40 people, killing eight. According to a tally kept by the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), an organization which has supported the families of political prisoners arrested during the 8888 uprising, more than 1,400 people had been killed as of September 2021.

2. The Military's Omnidirectional Oppression and the Crisis on the Interactiveness

Since the civil war began, it has been difficult to get a grasp on the true situation in Myanmar outside the occasional news broadcasts that are transmitted by foreign media. It is necessary to synthesize fragmented news stories and local witness testimonies to understand the substantive truth. The military had already taken control of the internet and mobile phone services last April, when my friends in Myanmar began updating me on the situation on the ground in preparation for the aforementioned conference. People were using SIM cards from neighboring countries to get around the block on mobile phone services. While the state has been unable to prevent the entire country from using mobile phones, social media censorship of individuals is confirmed to be widespread. Around 100 days after the coup, those who had been spreading the demands for democracy and casualties via Twitter and Facebook were hunted down by the military and their posts deleted. Now everyone is using untraceable mobile phone apps rather than social media to tell the outside world what is happening in Myanmar.

The military's position is still relatively strong. They continue to suppress the public internally through subjugation and externally by winning the diplomatic approval and official recognition as a legitimate government by the international community. It was in these circumstances that ASEAN refused to allow Min Aung Hlaing to attend its regular Summit (chaired by Brunei) in October 2021, and urged implementation of the agreement for a peaceful resolution to the situation in Myanmar. However, unfortunately, this year's ASEAN Chair, Cambodia, has a very friendly attitude towards Myanmar's military regime. In January, Prime Minister Hun Sen visited Myanmar and issued a meaningless joint statement with Commander-in-chief Hlaing about a peaceful resolution. At first glance, this may seem to be a simple foreign news piece about Prime Minister Hun Sen, who recently handed over his position as head of state to his son, visiting a neighboring country to secure stability for his regime through solidarity with the military, but the true meaning is more painful. Because it shows that even diplomatic sanctions through ASEAN against Myanmar's military will not be easy in 2022 while Cambodia is the chair. And it is a threat to Asian civil society to worry about. In fact, Prime Minister Hun Sen's visit to

Myanmar appears to have come as a greater shock to the people of Myanmar too. They found ASEAN's refusal to allow Commander-in-chief Hlaing's to visit in 2021 encouraging, but this official visit by the ASEAN Chair Cambodia proved that the NUG has no diplomatic power and unable to receive any support from the regional organization. In fact, there were protests in Myanmar where people burned Prime Minister Hun Sen's photo and stomped on it. Korean civil society also issued a statement condemning this to stand in solidarity with the Myanmar residents of Korea, but the impact was minimal.

3. A Multi-faceted Disaster and the Fight Against Uncertainty

The UN has continued to watch the situation in Myanmar unfold with interest. As well as the UN has continued to appeal to the international community for active help, they send envoys and experts to the military to stop the violence. Also they try to block the private sectors' funding streams to the military. However, it is difficult to regard any of these efforts as a direct denunciation or sanctions against the military. In September 2021, UN Secretary General Guterres submitted a report demanding that the international community allow access to humanitarian support and assistance in response to the crisis in Myanmar and calling for the release of Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint. The report received 119 approvals, while 36 countries abstained including China, and Belarus voted against it. In November, the Security Council called for an end to the violence in Myanmar, but this seemed to be focused on the security of Rohingya refugees rather than the other violence perpetrated by the military. The UN has also indicated that ASEAN must play an important role in improving the situation in Myanmar. However, as referenced above, despite the opposition of some member states, ASEAN appears close to a split and has failed to send proper diplomatic pressure against the military. In December, a statement issued by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights called the conviction of Aung San Suu Kyi a "fake trial," but this also seems to have been a mere declaration with no real influence on the situation.

According to the data released in October 2021 by the UN's Myanmar team, there are more than 3 million people in need of urgent humanitarian assistance due to various

threats to their lives including conflict, food insecurity, natural disasters, and COVID-19. Statements from locals in Myanmar also point to the severity of the situation. Industry and commerce have collapsed, and the supply of essential resources such as water and electricity is unstable. The military is using all of these factors as tools to suppress the people. Rather than repairing collapsed medical facilities, the military is trying to break the will of the people to resist by committing terrors against doctors, lawyers, journalists, and intellectuals while arresting and detaining them. Influential social figures like celebrities who communicated with citizens through social media have been indiscriminately detained or disappeared. In spite of these circumstances, young people left the cities and scattered to the provinces to join the armed forces in the mountains. People who remain in the cities are selling their asset and sending the money to the mountain areas to support it. Unlike the democratization struggle in 1988 was mainly led by college students, intellectuals, and Buddhists leaders, this democracy movement is mostly comprised of men and women under 30. People in their twenties and even 17 and 18-year-olds are said to be joining the armed struggle. Young teenagers, who are about the same age as our high school students, are going into the mountains and learning how to use guns and make bombs so that they can engage with the military. My acquaintance who shared this news with me said that he had closed his business and was sending monetary support to the armed resistance every month. He said that he had room to keep sending money now, but that he was ready to go into the mountains himself to fight when the time came.

Despite this heart-wrenching situation, people in Myanmar are well aware of the support from Korea and express their gratitude. As the interest of international civil society declines, only few countries like Korea and Japan continuously keep their eyes on Myanmar's situation. In solidarity with Myanmar residents and international students in Korea, Korean civil society has been working to support Myanmar. Activities include statements, campaigns, and fundraising efforts. Although several routes to transmit the monetary support to Myanmar, limitations and worries are still existing since all official routes are closed.

One thing that multiple opinions point at is the Korea's experience of civic revolution functions as the interactive experience both in Korea and Myanmar as it did among democracy seeking countries in Asia. Just as Korea's student movement gained

courage from overseas democratization movements in the past, Korea's history of democratization, along with its economic and social development, is a great inspiration for Asian countries seeking to break down authoritarianism and promote democracy. Korean people recall the pain of Gwangju and the memories of the Candlelights Revolution while watching Myanmar's democratization movement. It makes Korean civil society to continue its support for Myanmar and the support encourages Myanmar's citizens to keep up the hope and fight the despair. Before the internet era, international solidarity reached to Korean civil society through international organizations; they supported Korean democratization movements with direct help such as financial support. Also inspirations came through books and songs beyond time and space. All these supports gave strength to Korean society to keep the struggle toward democracy. In these days, through fast information exchange, the solidarity of the international civil society work as a powerful actor by encouraging citizens to actively motivate and inspire each other for keeping their struggles toward democracy.

Unfortunately, the current assistance by civil society to help Myanmar has to fight against the consistent uncertainty although its purpose is very clear. It is difficult to say which areas we should focus our support on. It is better to approach general civil society? Should we focus on the humanitarian crisis? Or should we support the armed struggle (actually, NUG's special ambassador to the Korean delegation officially requested arms support for Myanmar's civil war)? It is also impossible to say whether the opinion of civil society needs to be united on this issue. However, we cannot just sit by and do nothing. This is because there is a multi-faceted disaster unfolding that directly threatens the lives of many people. Civil society continues to take up the fight for its bloodied neighbors. The international community will continue its effort to show the solidarity and provide support mobilizing every possible way. And on the day that Myanmar's doors reopen, the solidarity of today will be a new driving force of civil society development in the country. And on the day that Myanmar's doors reopen, the solidarity of today will be a new driving force of civil society development in the country.

From this question, I felt like I got the clue of what Korean and international civil society should do for Myanmar. I responded, "Democracy is not a fight you win or lose, it is an 'endless process' of working together and nurturing the society to secure the civil

rights. Even Koreans do not believe that we have fully achieved democracy. That is why Koreans will never turn away from the people of Myanmar.” ■

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