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# Questions Thrown at Korean Media by Myanmar's Democratization Protests

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SisaIN



## 1. "What Can Korea Do to Save the Lives of Myanmar's Citizens?"

SisaIN's ongoing coverage of Myanmar that started in March 2021 and lasted for five months under the hashtag #WatchingMyanmar began with this question<sup>1)</sup>. It was clearly unusual for a journalist to begin not by asking "what is happening," but "what can we do." The media's natural role is to convey the reality of a country's anti-human crimes as they happen, but it must be asked whether simply broadcasting bloodshed in real time is the entirety of their role. Both foreign and domestic media wondered as they watched the situation develop in Myanmar, isolated from the rest of the world thanks to the flight suspensions caused by COVID-19. "What exactly is the role of the media? Can the media ever be neutral?"

SisaIN wasn't the only media outlet that covered the active protests against the coup in Myanmar. Why was the press so interested in an issue happening in another country 4,000km away? We want to talk about why we decided to report actively on Myanmar's civil resistance, our solidarity with local journalists, what we learned in the process, and what challenges remain. The domestic media's record keeping of Myanmar's solidarity activities is an important beginning to understanding the traces left by Myanmar's democratization protests in Korean society. Moreover, with reporting on Myanmar having fallen substantially, this can become an opportunity to think about the next steps that the media should take to report on the current deadlock.

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1) For more information, please refer to the special website organized by SisaIN (<http://myanmar.sisain.co.kr/>).

## 2. Stepping Back in Time to One Year Ago

As the number of victims of the military and police's strong suppression campaign in Myanmar grew, headlines like "Bloody Sunday," "Hell Night," and "Bloodshed" filled the pages of Korean local news. Koreans watched helplessly as the situation unfolded. SisaIN began meeting weekly with Myanmar residents of Korea who held local protests denouncing the military. That was the only scene that could be covered right away.

Those we covered had ended up with a different scene on their hands than what they had expected. The messenger inboxes on their smartphones were filled with SOS requests sent by local protesters in Myanmar requesting fees for medical treatment, bulletproof vests and helmets, USIM cards (after the military cut off the internet, the Thai USIM cards were the only way people could get online), and living expenses for those who were part of the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). Photos of people on the ground with their skin torn and bleeding appeared as they scrolled through social media. "I'm unarmed and facing the military." "A bullet pierced my jaw, I need money to get treatment." "I need help with funeral expense." Those who had established themselves in Korea as migrant workers, international students, or marriage migrants were transformed on February 1, 2021 into activists. That's when I asked for the first time: "What can we do for Myanmar?"

If it hadn't been for COVID-19, a number of domestic and foreign media outlets would have gone to Myanmar, and if foreign media had been present, the situation in the country might not have been so prolonged. As it was, the only foreign journalists in the world who were able to enter Yangon, Myanmar "with military permission" were Clarissa Ward and her team from the BBC on March 31 last year. All of the news coverage was done with the military accompanying the reporters, and as they left the scene, the Myanmar military detained those who had spoken with the BBC. A local Myanmar journalist who I met while I was covering the country told me this in a furious voice. "Why don't any countries intervene? It's a question we ask frequently. The answer is simple. There is no benefit to be had from helping Myanmar." At the time, the Myanmar protesters took to the streets with signs with the slogan "#How many dead bodies needed to take action?"

### 3. The Reason SisaIN Launched a Myanmar Campaign

One way that the Myanmar military, which triggered the coup, created chaos was through a kind of isolation strategy. They banned assembly using COVID-19 as an excuse to suppress protests, cut off the internet, and target journalists and media outlets. Journalists in Myanmar became the military's first targets. The military revoked the publishing licenses of independent media and charged journalists and citizen journalists covering the protests with "dissemination of fake news" and "incitement." As of January 10, 2022, 115 journalists in Myanmar have been arrested and 44 have been detained (Reporting ASEAN 2021).

It was clear that unless the incidents marked with the hashtag #WhatsHappeninginMyanmar such as violence, shootings, and state repression continued to be shared online, the interest and therefore pressure and condemnation of the international community would lessen. One journalist in Myanmar said "We are empowered by those who are watching us from abroad." When I heard the message "keep watching us," I realized the reality that what Myanmar is fighting against is not the military, but rather isolation. If military rule becomes easier when citizens are isolated, then is the opposite, that military rule becomes more vulnerable when citizens are connected to the outside, also true? The international community must move to resolve the situation in Myanmar, and in order to get the international community to move, news of the situation must continue to be disseminated. We decided to participate by playing this role.

Reporters and journalists in Myanmar continued to risk their lives to record the suffering in Myanmar even after the publishing companies were closed or kicked out of the country. I asked them to contribute. Communication and collaboration with journalists in Myanmar was an ongoing challenge. Maintaining a line of communication, receiving articles on schedule, and paying them was not a smooth process. The internet was cut off from 1am to 9am local time every day, so the journalists had to move periodically to avoid the military and police. As of 2022, the Myanmar journalists who have been linked to us have either crossed the Thai border after having their lives threatened, entered the border area and taken up arms, or been imprisoned.

In April 2021, SisaIN launched the social enterprise "Today's Action" and the

#WatchingMyanmar campaign. More than 800 people contributed to our fundraising drive to pay journalists in Myanmar for their news coverage (the campaign lasted until May 20, 2021, and 854 people contributed a total of 37,125,386 KRW). There was also the question "isn't this basically the role that the media should play"? I hoped that the fees we sent would be a small motivational force for the journalists who had been without income for months to continue their coverage. Above all, for a media outlet to place an issue on the permanent agenda, the editorial board must be understanding and willing to ensure that the issue is not erased or forgotten among the incessant flood of news articles on other topics. The anti-coup protests in Myanmar were determined to be an important enough issue to invest the necessary manpower, financial resources, and editorial personnel even though it was an overseas issue.

#### 4. A Flow of Solidarity with Myanmar in Korean Media

Lee Yoo-kyung, an expert in international conflict who has long been interested in Myanmar, provided the following assessment of the Korean media's reporting on the Myanmar democratization protests. "Has the Korean media ever paid attention to international issues like this? I think it is playing a very positive role by setting the agenda of what it is we need to know. To go one step further, compared to the number of articles published, diversity, in-depth reporting, and analysis of the issue still seems quite lacking" (broadcast on the KBS program "Inquiring Journalists Q" on May 17, 2021). Beyond relaying the brutal violence of the military, there have not been sufficient attempts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the democratic crisis in Myanmar, such as how the military became so powerful and its long history of conflicts with ethnic minorities.

Nevertheless, considering that the domestic media tends to handle foreign issues merely as "hot topics," it is significant that there have been a variety of efforts made by the media to provide informative reporting on the Myanmar issue. On April 12, 2021, the Weekly Trend produced a special issue titled "Citizens Win" comprising photos and articles from journalists in Myanmar. At the time, Kim Young-mi, a professional producer in the conflict zone who participated in the project, gathered reporters from Myanmar on site to

garner attention regarding the "Docu and News Korea" media outlet. In August 2021, OhMyNews launched the online serial "I am a Journalist in Myanmar—Crisis Journalism Restoration Project." This enabled the receipt of articles from the Myanmar Photojournalists Association (MPA) and their dissemination in both Korean and Burmese with the support of readers. As of January 14, 2022, over 20 million KRW had been collected. Hankyoreh 21 continues its #StandwithMyanmar series both on the ground and online, and posts articles in Burmese every week in solidarity and support of the people of Myanmar. In addition, broadcasting companies have produced several documentaries providing updates on the local situation in Myanmar and in-depth analysis on the coup including KBS Sisa Planning Window, Sisa Direct, and MBC's PD Handbook.

What had changed? Korean civil society has been more fervent in its support of and solidarity for the democratization protests in Myanmar than in any other country. On February 24, 2021, Myanmar citizens were filmed kneeling in front of the Korean embassy in Yangon and saying "please help me." South Korean citizens, who want to do anything they can to help, have done everything from staging fundraising activities, street protests, signature campaigns, and social media campaigns. These scenes have been transmitted to those in Myanmar through social media. Many who saw the protests in Myanmar in 2021 were reminded of the Gwangju protests in 1980. The sense of responsibility as one of the few countries in Asia that has succeeded in consolidating democracy has coexisted delicately with the shame and indebtedness of having a shared history of military dictatorship and national violence.

On March 2, the Korea Video Journalists Association issued a statement of solidarity expressing this sentiment. "We South Korean video journalists who clearly remember the horrors of the Gwangju Democratization Struggle in May 1980 came across the tragic news and videos from Myanmar and could not help but be reminded of that terrible month. We could not put words to our shock and anger. The apathy of Korea's video journalists towards Gwangju in May was made up for by the fierce coverage of media outlets and journalists from other countries like German video journalist Jürgen Hinzpeter who risked their lives. Thanks to their video coverage and reporting, even though Gwangju was isolated from the rest of Korea, the world learned of the suffering that was wrought there, which created international solidarity with the protests of our

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citizens in support of democracy. In response to the appeal of Myanmar's citizens asking 'how much more blood must be shed?,' our broadcast journalists are actively covering and reporting on Myanmar's fiery democratic struggle in an attempt to pay the debt that we owe to the citizens of Gwangju in South Korea in 1980 and the people of the world who supported us."

Senior journalists from the 1980s have continued to issue statements of solidarity. On April 13, five media organizations, including the Korea Organization for Freedom of the Press and Association of Retired Journalists from the 1980s, stood in front of the Myanmar embassy in Korea and held a press conference. "Like the people of Myanmar, we have suffered the pain of a military coup perpetrated by those who covet power and wealth and have been kicked out of scenes for providing news coverage. We, who have inherited the Gwangju Democratization Struggle and fought strongly for a democratic press and press freedom against a military dictatorship, send our strong support to the people of Myanmar as they engage in righteous protest and pledge strong solidarity with Myanmar's democratic civil society."

## **5. Myanmar as an Instrument by which to View Korea**

Of course, there are criticisms that Gwangju and Myanmar should not be equated. The geopolitical positions and international situations surrounding the two countries are entirely different, and Myanmar has a longer history of military rule than South Korea as well as prolonged conflict between ethnic minorities. So we need to be vigilant about "informing" them about democracy or viewing Myanmar "advantageously" or "kindly."

One thing is clear: the history of Gwangju is a deeply sensitive link to Asian democratic crises such as those in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Myanmar. Last May, Hong Kong, Thailand, South Korea (Gwangju), and Myanmar's 2030 youths gathered and organized a meeting on the theme of Asian democracy, calling themselves the "Milktea Alliance." Lee Hee-young, a native of Gwangju who joined the conference, talked about it. "Watching the citizens of Gwangju in solidarity with other Asian countries gave me a fresh look at the events of May 18. Even when we held the first 'pots and pans' protest (a

protest in solidarity with the citizens of Myanmar who express resistance to the military by banging pots and pans), we did not expect that so many older people would participate every week. Looking at these elders made me think that perhaps we could once again face and heal the memories of the 1980s. Gwangju continues to suffer from invisible discrimination, but that has meant that it is a city where oppressed voices can easily make themselves heard."

The situation in Myanmar has thus awakened a "feeling of being apart but connected." This has meant that the media has a great deal of things to worry about and deal with. How should questions about corporate social responsibility be asked to a company that was once regarded as playing a leading role in economic growth and is now suspected of funding the military following the coup? Can Korean society go beyond issuing statements against the military and take in refugees? What are the tasks ahead to uncover the truth and heal the trauma of the families who were left bereaved in the May 18 Gwangju tragedy? What about the problem of the human rights of Myanmar's migrant workers who suffer invisible forms of discrimination? It is not a simple matter to support the democratization of Myanmar. The questions that Myanmar has thrown at our society are heavy ones.

## 6. Challenges for the Media One Year After the Coup

One of the readers who participated in the SisaIN #WatchingMyanmar campaign is particularly memorable. "Even though I am not a citizen of Myanmar, I was comforted (as I participated in the campaign). There was a feeling that solidarity would build up into a greater strength, and a sense of closeness, belonging, and comfort that the solidarity itself gave me." I thought it would expand democracy and civil society by capturing how Myanmar's democratization protests, which were dismissed as just "other countries," change Korean civil society and form a basis on which to connect Asian citizens. This is no different from the duties of the press.

One thing that I have learned from reporting on Myanmar is that democracies need to be surrounded by other democracies. When a country's democracy is at risk, the

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international community needs the support and assistance of neighboring countries to better intervene. The international community, including organizations like the United Nations and ASEAN, have failed to give the military official warnings or care much about the situation is because they have become used to Myanmar's prolonged isolation measures. Ultimately, General Min Aung Hlaing announced that he would extend the state of emergency until August 2023, breaking his promise to hold a general election within a year of the coup. He then took office as Prime Minister. Southeast Asian researchers concluded that this move was the beginning of the military's plan for long-term rule. Myanmar has entered a de facto state of civil war.

The Media Freedom Index, which is one indicator of democracy, has demonstrated a similar pattern. In the 2021 Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders last April, all of the Asian countries except for Taiwan (43rd), South Korea (42nd), Japan (67th), and Mongolia (68th) were outside the top 100. Military dictatorship and media repression are at the heart of the crisis faced by reporters in Southeast Asia. Perhaps as a result, there have been signs that struggling Asian journalists have flocked around the crisis in Myanmar. Asian journalists associations, such as the Thai Foreign Correspondents' Club (FCCT), have sought practical ways to help such as through fundraising activities and the provision of equipment. Gwen Robinson, former FCCT president, said "Until recently, the Thai media has followed the law that requires censoring references to the royal family. However, this has started to change. Watching the struggle of Myanmar's media against censorship, I felt that the media in Thailand was no different." How the current situation in Myanmar continues to unfold will affect the military as well as citizens in Hong Kong, Thailand, the Philippines, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian countries.

It has been one year since the coup in Myanmar. The interest of the international community and the volume of reporting on the crisis have dropped significantly. Within the media, there is also the reality that there are "more pressing issues" which push it aside. However, there has not been a single day in Myanmar where the citizens of the country have failed to raise their voices in opposition to the coup. The hashtag movements #SaveMyanmar and #PrayForMyanmar continue daily on social media, where journalists on the scene record acts of military violence and civil resistance. "Someone has to stay here and report. We will show the international community the human rights

abuses and acts of violence perpetrated by the military. I know that the citizens of Myanmar are prepared to fight to the end, so no matter what happens to me I won't regret my decision now" (Myanmar independent press outlet Frontier Myanmar reporter, December 16). Faithfully recording these voices is one way to keep the embers of interest in Myanmar alive. This is because moving the international situation with the intertwined interests of each country, and creating pressure on the international community that will make it difficult to ignore Myanmar's military, ultimately begins with cultivating the interest of the public. This is why the question "what can Korea do for Myanmar's democratization?" has not yet been answered. This is why discussions in the media, civil society, and the government ministries must continue. ■

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■ **Younghwa Kim** has been working for <SisaIN> as a report since 2018. She has covered pro-democracy protests in Hongkong in 2009, in Thailand in 2020, and in Myanmar in 2021. In March 2021, she began with the small question “What can we do for Myanmar?” and has arrived at the #WatchingMyanmar campaign. Through the two-month campaign started in April, many Koreans showed their support for independent journalists in Myanmar and participated in “today’s actions” for the democracy in the country. She is interested in recording Asian democracies going through turbulent times and the ways that young people in the countries break through the challenge.

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