

MYANMAR PROTESTS

Inclusion of minorities can strengthen the movement



TASNEEM TAYEB

MYANMAR is burning: with rage, with demonstrations, with the fierce determination of the civilians to end the newly imposed military rule.

From peaceful demonstrations the protests have taken a bloody turn, with pro-democracy protesters refusing to leave the streets and the military using live ammunition to disperse them. On February 28, at least 18 people were killed in what has come to be known as the bloodiest day of the protests. And just yesterday, March 3, at least nine people were killed as security forces fired on protesters.

The military crackdown on the protesters has been swift and brutal. The violence has grown so intense that Myanmar has been described as a "battlefield" by Charles Maung Bo, the first Catholic cardinal of the country. But the protesters have not backed down. From Yangon to Naypyidaw, Myanmar's new capital—where military facilities are said to "form something of a ring around the civilian buildings, which are closer to the centre, effectively reducing the power and strength of popular uprisings in the capital", as reported by The Interpreter—the anti-military protests have spread like wildfire across the length and breadth of the highly conservative country.

Using violence, however, is not a new tendency for Myanmar military. If anything, the Tatmadaw, as the military is commonly known as, has a legacy of brutality and bloodshed. For decades, the Tatmadaw has suppressed its own people with violent means and unleashed unspeakable horrors on the minority communities.

In 1988, when the civilians rose up against the then military regime, the latter resorted to violent means to quash the uprising. The ruthlessness of their actions in 1988 had left everyone speechless. They not only killed the

protesters but also the healthcare professionals who were treating the wounded at the Rangoon Hospital. That is why it comes as no surprise that the military is now detaining emergency medical assistants attending to the injured, as reported by multiple media outlets.

While Myanmar military's suppression of its own people has been shameful, its treatment of the minorities is a tale of continued savagery and persecution. They butchered men and boys, raped women and girls, and left orphaned, displaced infants for dead. The Rohingya women and girls were "tied by their hair and hands to trees and gang-raped, for no other reason than being Rohingya Muslims", as recounted in a story published by The Guardian.

In an interview with the Time magazine in March 2019, prominent lawyer and activist Razia Sultana mentioned a 14-year-old girl who had been raped by more than 30 soldiers. "The army is cutting women's breasts off, gouging out their eyes. This is not just rape. This is a weapon to punish the community," she added. Since August 25, 2017, it is estimated that more than 24,000 Rohingya Muslims have been killed by the Myanmar military, according to the Ontario International Development Agency. More than 730,000 Rohingya individuals had to flee to Bangladesh for shelter from the mass slaughter.

The ethnic cleansing of the minority took place under the very nose of a regime that was elected by the people. The government was led by Aung Sung Suu Kyi, a leader who refused to utter the word "Rohingya", even in her 30-minute speech during the hearing of a case against the military's actions at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). An Al Jazeera report detailed, "she failed to use one word in the 3,379-word speech to describe the minority, an ethnic group that has been persecuted for years in Myanmar and denied citizenship rights—Rohingya... She only used the word Rohingya when referring to ARSA [Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army]."



Tear gas and fire extinguisher gas float around demonstrators during a protest against the military coup in Yangon, Myanmar, on March 2, 2021.

PHOTO: REUTERS/STRINGER

"Critics said her refusal to use the word is part of Myanmar's attempt [to] strip the minority of their identity and rights," the report added.

For decades, the Myanmar military has been proactively engaged in ethnic cleansing operations, but the common people did not rise up against those injustices. With regard to the military brutality against the minorities, The Atlantic magazine quoted Myanmar activist Thinzar Shunlei Yi as saying, "For so long people were already aware of all these things, but they didn't stand up." It is only when the civilians have been faced with an existential dilemma of their own that they have decided that it is time to protest.

The protesters are now demonstrating in front of the UN office in Yangon, calling on the international body to come to their aid against this unwanted and undesirable military rule—the same organisation that the people of Myanmar had criticised for many years for its concerns about the treatment of the Rohingya. Even during the Suu Kyi reign, the UN and its staff were accused of aiding "terrorists", and had been barred from entering Myanmar.

The credibility of the UN had been questioned even a few months ago by the very people who are now calling on it for rescue from this bloody mess.

The transformation of the beastly behemoth that the Myanmar military has morphed into has not happened overnight. The reckless confidence that the military is now so assuredly brandishing is the result of years of inaction of the people and political leaders in raising their voices against the former's misdeeds. Even when Suu Kyi was in power, it was a sort of a power-sharing arrangement where the appeasement of the military had been a key priority.

The military had been allowed to consolidate its muscle unchecked. They had been allowed to carry out ethnic cleansing of minorities with impunity, and to amass fortune through two giant conglomerates. The result: a powerful, all-consuming beast that has risen up once again, this time against the very masses and its own motherland.

Most of the Myanmar military generals do not have assets outside the country; most have not travelled abroad ever, and a lot of them do not even speak

foreign languages. Therefore, foreign sanctions on military officers would not do much to tame the junta. In fact, if anything, economic sanctions will only aggravate the suffering of the common people who are still reeling from the economic aftershocks of the pandemic.

"And over the past year, Covid-19 has led to a near-collapse of the economy, with those making less than USD 1.90 a day soaring from 16 percent to 63 percent of the population between January and October 2020," said Thant Myint-U, a former member of Myanmar's National Economic and Social Advisory Council, historian and author of The Hidden History of Burma, in an interview with Foreign Policy.

It seems the only way out of this coup will be through the united popular protests. The people of Myanmar need to rise above their religious and ethnic differences and come together to fight against this common enemy of democracy. The military—empowered by years of dominance—can only be moved by internal pressure. With the ongoing civil disobedience movement hampering trade, the Myanmar military's economic arm has already been shaken. If the people can continue to create pressure on the military through this civil disobedience movement, it will be difficult for it to hold onto power for long.

The ethnic minorities are not the enemy of Myanmar—they are part of the country. And they can play a role in the fight against the misadventures of the military. If the majority population can overcome their decades-old hatred and prejudice against the minorities and join hands with the latter, it will send a clear and strong message to military: that the entirety of Myanmar has united against them and it will no longer be allowed to suppress them.

A united internal front against the military is the only way out for the people of Myanmar, and they must not let this opportunity pass to build a truly inclusive and democratic nation.

Tasneem Tayeb is a columnist for The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is: @TayebTasneem

IN MEMORIAM

An illustrious civil servant and social worker

MD. AHSAN-UZ ZAMAN

MD. MAHBUBUZZAMAN was born on November 25, 1929 in Rajshahi town, a stone's throw from Rajshahi Loknath High School from where he and all his siblings passed their SSC exams. He joined Pakistan Civil Service in 1954 and became a CSP officer. During his illustrious career, he served as the Sub-Divisional Officer of Nilphamari, Deputy Commissioner of Rangpur, Registrar of Cooperatives Societies, Chairman of Tea Board, second Establishment Secretary of Bangladesh, Home Secretary, and then Cabinet Secretary, the highest rank of civil service during that time.

After a long career in public service, he retired on November 24, 1986. Then he was appointed as an Advisor to the President with the rank of a full minister. In 1987, he contested in the bi-election of Badalgachhi-Mohadevpur parliamentary seat of Naogaon after the incumbent MP, Md. Barkatullah, passed away. Mr. Zaman won the seat and became a Member of Parliament.

Thereafter, he was appointed as the Minister of Agriculture. Perhaps the principal reason for this appointment was that Mr. Zaman was an agriculture graduate himself and used to promote agriculture throughout his life. Upon obtaining his Bachelor's degree in agriculture from Tejgaon Agriculture College, he became the Superintendent of Dhaka Farms prior to becoming a CSP, living in a house on the grounds

surrounding the compound which is now part of the National Parliament complex.

While a bureaucrat, he liked to call himself a "Krishibid", and he was given the Krishibid award posthumously by the Prime Minister in 2009. During his early life, he often mused that the Barind area of Rajshahi could feed the entire nation if properly irrigated. As agriculture minister, he was instrumental in spearheading government initiatives for irrigation, through Bangladesh Agricultural Development Corporation (BADCO), bringing thousands of acres of arid land of Barind area into agricultural production. Whereas earlier there was no crop output, the Barind land became the rice belt of the nation and started producing three crops a year. Consequently, an agricultural revolution took place in an area that not only contributes to the food sufficiency of the nation but also provides livelihood to thousands of farmers.

Mr. Zaman was a great organiser and an able administrator. He was optimistic, easy-going, and humble. He was also witty and a great storyteller. He could be light-hearted while being authoritative at the same time. He led a glorious life and dedicated himself towards voluntary social welfare efforts after his retirement. He was known for the many ways in which he helped people, many of whom would never come to know about it. It would be much later that they would know the role played by Mr. Zaman



Md. Mahbubuzzaman (1929-2008)

in either protecting or furthering their careers. He did so as he felt it was part of his job to help.

His involvement in politics was short-lived. Politics, it would seem, was not his forte. After leaving active service in 1990, another phase of his life started. He threw himself towards the cause of social service. He was Chairman of Aziz and Company, first Chairman of Social Marketing Company (SMC), and Chairman of Standard Credit & Cooperative Society. He was President of Bangladesh Scouts, a position he held from 1984 to 2000 (he was a scout during his childhood). The Upazila system that is currently in place, which was initiated in the early eighties by the then President, was given shape during Mr. Zaman's tenure as Cabinet Secretary. He played a major role in the execution of the government initiative

of upgradation of all the Thanas of the country into Upazilas.

Mr. Zaman, along with his senior colleagues and friends, worked tirelessly to make a lasting contribution for retired government servants and the medical services field. He was actively involved in the development of "Obosor Bhaban" in Dhanmondi as a member of Retired Government Employees Welfare Association, establishment of a medical building for Bangladesh Medical College in Dhanmondi, and the hospital complex of Uttara Adhunik Hospital in Uttara as a founder member of Bangladesh Medical Studies and Research Institute. After the independence of the country in 1971, he was made Member-Secretary of the Committee for Re-organization of Civil Administration in Bangladesh by the President. It was based on the recommendation of this committee that the blueprint of the civil administration of Bangladesh was established.

Mr. Zaman was an avid walker and became ill while walking on the morning of January 11, 2008, near his house in Dhanmondi. He didn't take it seriously. After that fall, however, he was never normal. He became disoriented and suffered from encephalitis and later, a heart attack, from which he got well briefly and received treatment in the country. Further treatment was done abroad for his recovery but he did not make it back to his beloved wife. He left behind the love of his family, friends

and well-wishers on March 3, 2008—just about a year before his eldest son, a bright army officer, was killed during the BDR carnage on February 25, 2009. Another son, a banker, and his loving wife live to this day.

He lies in eternal rest just a row away from his eldest son's resting place at the military graveyard in Banani, Dhaka.

There is a small place in Sapahar, Naogaon which was named after him, as "Zaman Nagar", upon his death. The library in the area was also named after him, just as was the girls' high school, as "Sapahar Zaman Nagar Girls High School". The people of Sapahar named them so in honour of the lasting contribution he had made to the area. Sapahar was turned into a Thana when he was Home Secretary and upgraded to an Upazila when he was Cabinet Secretary. Every year, the inhabitants of the area remember him on his death anniversary for his many contributions.

Above all, he profoundly loved his country which he amply demonstrated through his public service. During his last days, when asked what was his favourite song, he replied, with childlike innocence yet surprise, "Why, of course Dhana Dhanya Pushpe Bhara!" When asked if he had any regrets in life, he said, nonchalantly, "none".

It has been 13 years since he left us. On this occasion, we urge everyone to pray for his eternal peace.

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Md. Ahsan-uz Zaman, younger son of Md. Mahbubuzzaman, is a banker.

QUOTABLE Quote

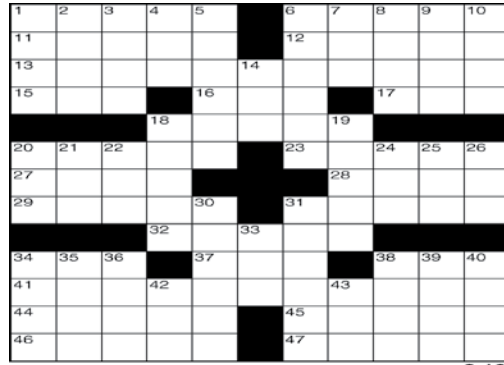


EMILY DICKINSON
(1830-1886)
American poet

If you take care of the small things, the big things take care of themselves.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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|----------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| ACROSS | 37 Snooze | 14 Binary base |
| 1 Baseball's Rod | 38 Mornings, for short | 18 Car of the '50s |
| 6 Blood line | 41 Wastes time talking | 19 Decade parts |
| 11 Throat dangler | 44 Like Poe tales | 20 "Summer Stock" studio |
| 12 Attempts | 45 Sports site | 21 "Exodus" hero |
| 13 Does a daring deed | 46 Beer amounts | 22 Maze runner |
| 15 "Roses - red" | 47 Light brown | 24 Can. neighbor |
| 16 Stunned wonder | | 25 Attack command |
| 17 Moody music | | 26 Plopped down |
| 18 Dark wood | | 30 Frees of suds |
| 20 With 27-Across, Lent preceder | DOWN | 31 1935 Astaire film |
| 23 Lorax creator | 1 Havana's land | 33 Yoga need |
| Dr. - | 2 State positively | 34 Super serves |
| 27 See 20-Across | 3 Hold the throne | 35 "That was close!" |
| 28 China setting | 4 Building wing | 36 Garr of "Tootsie" |
| 29 Bishop's headwear | 5 Pungent condiment | 38 Three or four |
| 31 Piece of land | 6 Acropolis setting | 39 "Death in Venice" author |
| 32 Long rides | 7 Mine yield | 40 Order to Spot |
| 34 Fitting | 8 Paella base | 42 Toupee's kin |
| | 9 Bulls or Bears | 43 Pitching stat |
| | 10 Regarding | |



TUESDAY'S ANSWERS

S L A P D E E R
S T Y L E A R M O R
P A N E L M A I N E
A N D R E W G A L
S C O T O V E R L Y
M E N C O I L E D
C L E A R S B E G
H A I L T O C A R E
A L E W A R R E N
T V S E T P E A C E
S I T A R S E C T S
N O T E E L K S

BEETLE BAILEY



BY MORT WALKER



BABY BLUES



BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



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