



**New  
Internationalist**

# 4 people in Myanmar

Easier English New Internationalist Ready Lesson – Intermediate +

# This lesson:

- Speaking
- Vocabulary
- Reading
- Writing summaries

# What do you know about Myanmar and what is going on there?



(You can read more about it here:

[https://ewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Courage and terror in Myanmar](https://ewiki.newint.org/index.php?title=Courage_and_terror_in_Myanmar))

# Match:

1/ coup

2/ junta

3/ dictatorship

4/ safe house

5/ banner

6/ graffiti

7/ to ration

- a) Undemocratic government by a dictator
- b) A house in a secret location to hide people
- c) Writing or drawing on walls in a public place
- d) To control the amount of food / petrol that people can have when there is not enough
- e) When a group suddenly and violently takes over power from a government
- f) A military or political group that rules a country after they took power by force

g)



# Key:

1/ coup e

2/ junta f

3/ dictatorship a

4/ safe house b

5/ banner g

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# You are going to read about 4 people in Myanmar:

- A doctor
- An activist
- An artist
- An MP



From the vocabulary and from what you know, predict 2 things each person will say.

Then read the 4 slides quickly to check if you're correct.

# THE DOCTOR

Than Oo\* (not his real name) stopped working on 3 February 2021. He didn't drive to Mandalay General Hospital, as he did every day for nearly 15 years. He took to the streets to protest. Thousands of medical workers across Myanmar did the same. Their protest against the coup was the start of a national Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) that has stopped nearly all public services.

'It was a really difficult decision,' said the 40-year-old. 'I had to leave my patients.' He was still having problems with the results of the previous junta rule. There was a time, he remembers, when patients arrived for operations carrying their own surgical equipment. By taking money from healthcare, the generals more or less destroyed it. Even after there was more money, payments for medical treatment in Myanmar increased and they are one of the world's highest. 'I won't let dictatorship happen again. We have to stop it – especially for our children.'

Than Oo spoke to me on the Signal app in a video call from a secret place. He looked very tired. His grey hair, which he normally cuts short, was long down to his shoulders. He was growing a beard for the first time. He and his wife, also a doctor, are forced to hide as doctors on strike are criminals in junta-ruled Myanmar. 'They have charged many of my colleagues,' he said. Hundreds of other doctors are hiding, too. Than Oo started organizing protests. But it was impossible to stop being a doctor. He treated patients at a private hospital for about a week before the generals threatened to close the clinic. 'Now I have to treat my patients secretly,' he says.

Every morning, seven days a week, Than Oo treats patients in a secret clinic. There are a few more clinics across Mandalay. At first, he treated patients on the phone. Doctors spoke to patients with an internet connection, even as most of the population was forced offline after the military blocked the internet on mobile phones. But when the protests and violence grew, this wasn't enough. 'It was like working on a battlefield,' he said. He talked about how doctors formed mobile clinics near protests for emergency care. 'Some were shot in the chest. We inserted emergency tubes. But at that time there were few doctors or facilities, so we lost many, many patients.' The doctors worked together. Through donations from people in Mandalay, less than two months after the coup, they opened a 100-bed hospital. 'We made it in a secret place. We have three operating theatres,' said Than Oo. Two ordinary cars are ambulances.

One patient he can't forget is an 18-year-old shot three times. 'The first time was in February – he saw his girlfriend die, she was shot in the head. He ran with her body and a gunshot wound to his stomach.' It didn't stop him going to protests. The next time he was shot in his hand. When Than Oo saw him, he had a wound on his right thigh. The team 'repaired the wound. But unfortunately we needed to cut off his right leg.' The hospital where Than Oo worked before is now a military base. Like thousands of others in the CDM, the doctor has had no salary since January. 'I know there is a very high chance they will arrest me. But I have to fight till the end.'

# THE ACTIVIST

'Let me see,' she says, counting on her fingers, 'this is the ninth safe house since the coup.' But Thinzar Shunlei Yi went on the run months earlier. She was an important democracy activist and so the military knew about her. There were new freedoms under Aung San Suu Kyi's leadership but protests against the army or government could mean prison for activists, journalists, and citizens.

The days before the first protests, she says, were terrible. 'We took a week to get on the streets because we knew about the power of the military. They're not like the police or the military in other countries. They kill innocent civilians in Rakhine, in Kachin, in Shan. We knew they would do this at some time.'

With courage and some doubts she led her first march to Sule Pagoda, the golden temple in downtown Yangon. The first protests were really big and full of energy. 'Almost every day thousands and thousands of people took to the streets, the bridges. Then I felt we were all together.'

But on 9 February, security forces shot Mya Thwate Thwate Khaing, 19, in the head during a peaceful protest in the capital Naypyidaw. She died after 10 days on life support, the first protester to die after the coup. The movement got stronger. 'They chased us like cat and mouse, kept us in streets for hours, we had to hide in alleyways,' says Shunlei, talking about the protests in Yangon. 'They used stun grenades, sometimes they shot rubber bullets to scare us.' They arrested around 30 of her friends. She says they abused all of them physically or sexually.

Smaller protests still go on. 'We kept going... But it's hard to keep people on the street,' says Shunlei. They have tried flash mobs and other guerrilla methods. In March they put her on the wanted list, with thousands, including actors, social media influencers, and journalists. She left Yangon at around the same time. 'They can't arrest all of us at once so I feel kind of relaxed.' Shunlei wanted to use her real name. 'My voice is my last defence of my free speech,' she says.

# THE ARTIST

Shein (not her real name), 33, was born seven months before the military stopped a mass pro-democracy protest. She grew up under the rule of the generals, when Myanmar was mostly isolated and there was no free speech, and graffiti was one way to express ideas. As a teenager she joined a group that climbed Yangon's walls at night as a protest against the junta rule. But when the National League for Democracy was elected to power, she stopped. 'I didn't want to destroy the street any more,' Shein said. 'Now the military are back, so we have to go back.'

Her art is a call to action. But at the beginning of the February coup she asked people not to resist. On day one, she drew a cat, an idea from a revolutionary Burmese poem, and told people to stay home. Next, she made a 'keyboard fighter to spread the message' on social media. By day six, there was anger on the streets. In Shein's pictures, strong women stared back, raised sarongs or pots in protest. They used stickers and held up posters at protests. In the evenings she put banners across city flyovers with the words, 'You messed with the wrong generation.' The banners were always gone by the next morning.

'We weren't afraid,' she said. Protest art has a long history in Myanmar's democracy movement. There are many slogans, memes, and illustrations online, helped by new campaigns such as Raise Three Fingers. The Milk Tea Alliance Artists have inspired Shein. The name came from protesters in Hong Kong, Thailand, and Taiwan last year because of milk, a drink popular in all three places. Fewer people are protesting outdoors now, said Shein, but there is still sometimes resistance art in parts of Yangon. 'They arrested a lot of my poet and musician friends,' she said. But Shein wants to stay in Yangon, where she's raising money with commercial work. 'We need to support our brothers and sisters,' she said, talking about those in the CDM. 'I think I am safe for now.'

# THE MP

The internet connection breaks so often that we exchange voice messages. A new MP explains why he has taken up arms. He is in a jungle training camp in Myanmar's borderlands.

'They gave me 24 hours,' said Mo Htet (not his real name), a 33-year-old, about the ethnic armed group he joined in February. 'So I decided very quickly. We need a new army to protect our people. Because our army is destroying them.'

Like a growing number of anti-coup protesters, he now thinks armed resistance is necessary to create a federal democracy. 'I got married during the pandemic. It was a very new, a very fresh family,' he begins. In November he was elected to parliament for the first time. 'I was full of energy, ready to serve my people.'

Instead, he is protesting on the streets with them. He watched as they shot dead 23 of his constituents, with many more wounded, at peaceful anti-coup rallies. Like the hundreds of people now joining ethnic armies in Myanmar, the killings helped him make his decision. 'They are not an army, they are not police, they are a terrorist group,' he said about the security forces. Mo Htet was a social worker. He describes his routine. The day begins at 4.00am with drills in the dark. Mosquito and scorpion bites are part of the routine. Food is rationed. In March he held a gun for the first time. 'I never dreamed that I would have to practise shooting. It feels like life is going to change now.'

Mo Htet doesn't tell us which ethnic army he joined. There are about 20 different groups that have fought the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's armed forces) for years. But now the National Unity Government, set up by Myanmar's civilian leaders in April, says it is bringing them together to form a federal army to fight the junta.

Some doubt whether different groups could work together, or challenge the powerful Tatmadaw. Mo Htet thinks they can. Every anti-coup protester I spoke to saw a role for armed resistance – most for the first time – in a fight for democracy with nonviolent resistance. 'We don't have battle experience, but we can learn how. We believe we can fight together. We believe we will win,' he said.

In February Mo Htet left home but he didn't tell his family where he was going. He hoped that would give them some protection. It wasn't enough. They too are hiding, and expecting arrest, as the authorities look for him.

'There are two types of MPs in my country,' says the new soldier. 'One is trying to fight, the other is in prison.'

# Writing summaries

In small groups, you now need to write a summary of the 4 stories for a newspaper article – the newspaper only has space for a maximum of 400 words.

- 1/ Read the 4 stories again, and each write down 5 important words or phrases from each story
- 2/ In groups, compare the words/phrases you have chosen and agree on the what is most important to include
- 3/ Write maximum 100 words about each of the 4 people
- 4/ Agree on a title for your article
- 5/ Proof-read carefully to make sure there are no spelling or grammar errors

# Follow-up:

**Read the original (more difficult) versions of the 2 articles – you will now understand them better:**

- <https://newint.org/features/2021/06/08/life-turning-point-inside-resistance>
- <https://newint.org/features/2021/06/08/big-story-myanmar-courage-and-terror-myanmar>

