

# ALIVE WITH RESISTANCE: DIASPORIC REFLECTIONS ON THE REVOLT IN MYANMAR

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The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

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to try to break those apart or what about something like land reform, something like at least repealing a couple of awful land laws passed in the so-called reform period around 2012. Maybe there could be demands to repeal those in a way that might do a bit to speak to real material circumstances. There hasn't been a ton of that discussion yet, but I think would be a mistake to see that this resistance as not being a material political movement. It's founded in a general strike, and that's important to remember.

**John: For sure. Thank you very much for speaking with us. I really appreciate it, and maybe I can trick you in the future and talk again about the history of Burma.**

**Geoff:** Very cool, thanks for having me, I should say I am pretty far away, these are just things I've picked up on from here. But if for your listeners or anyone, obviously, I'm just always trying to pay attention to what people do at the barricades and otherwise in the country and we can also see what they're up to and pay attention to what they're saying. Thanks for giving me the chance to chat at least. I really enjoyed it.

**John:** I enjoyed it too. Thank you.



This is a conversation with Geoff Aung (@Rgnhardliner on twitter), a Burmese American Marxist anthropology Phd candidate at Columbia University living abroad, about the current uprising, repression and revolutionary potentials in Myanmar. We discuss the evolution of tactics on the ground as revolutionaries adapt to the brutal murders of protesters by the state. Geoff also talks about the ways in which this movement is different from similar current movements in Asia and some of the historical context of struggle in Myanmar.

The host, John, wishes they'd had more time to dig into further questions. There are some links below of news sources and articles on the struggle in Myanmar.

Numerous links to more readings on the topics discussed here, as well as avenues for solidarity can be found at <https://the-finalstrawradio.noblogs.org/> by searching for the episode title. There's also featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

**John:** Welcome back to the Final Straw, my name is John, I'm a guest interviewer and today I'm interviewing Geoff Aung. Geoff, do you mind introducing yourself a little bit?

**Geoff:** Sure, I'm a PhD candidate at Columbia in the Anthropology Department and my work focuses on large-scale infrastructure projects and political struggles that tend to coalesce around them. My main work is in Southern Burma, Southern Myanmar.

**John:** Oh yeah, and we're going to be talking about the current conflicts and uprising in Myanmar, as well as a little bit of the history of uprisings and ethnic struggle there.

**Geoff:** Awesome!

**John:** I wanted to first ask this very simple question, but a lot of my friends ask me if they should be saying Burma, they should be saying Myanmar or if it's like one is woke and one is ten key? In my mind, they're both both, but I don't know if you could actually help me clarify that.

**Geoff:** Yeah, they're shifting the political register of those two names. The thing is they both mean the same thing, right? They both signify the Bamar, lowland Burman majority and at different points in time, one or the other has been seen as the worst name by different people. I mean even in the 30s, actually, a bunch of the Thirty Comrades, a bunch of anti-colonial leaders, specifically chose to use Burma because they felt Myanmar too closely signified the Burman majority and arguably, that's flipped over time, and now some people think that Burma, as a name, is too closely aligned with the Burman majority. Myanmar is supposedly more inclusive, but the name goes back to the same route.

**John:** In the language Burmese, "Myanmar" means "Burman".

**Geoff:** Yeah, and for a while, you could tell people's political leanings by which name they used. I think that's less and less the case. I grew up using Burma, and in my family, Myanmar is still a word that is closely

I don't see a lot of explicit articulate in the direct sense of sort of leftist political thought. But that's the question: to what extent do we need to speak or articulate our leftist vision or to be leftist? When you see the general strike, maybe people aren't passing out copies of, I don't know, the Communist Manifesto or something, but this is a militant movement based on overthrowing, in part, certain economic realities in the country.

And so there's a lot of explicit political discourses is liberal, obviously, but there are economic demands that are in play as well. And in some ways, that doesn't necessarily bother me, just because I think the question of leftist revolutionary movements in the past. I'm not nostalgic necessarily, I do think they're good and important independent leftist political genealogies in Burma that are not simply a question of the authoritarian socialism that congealed in the state. Before Ne Win's dictatorship, but even during in some ways, you had worker and peasant writers activists who were articulating a leftist project that had nothing to do with authoritarian power. In fact, quite the opposite. Maybe we could think, okay, are people appealing back to that right now? Not really, and maybe that's unfortunate, in some sense, but if we acknowledge that political thinking depends on material circumstances in some way, the material conditions have changed.

There's no reason to believe necessarily that in the current moment the explicit political discourse we hear would match what we heard decades ago. I don't think it's a problem really that there's no overt leftist discourse or not that much anyway, there is some. I think that as material conditions shift, we see shifts in political visions, political strategies, and I think some of what we've seen with the massive general strike has been the most encouraging phenomenon that we've seen along those lines for quite some time. In terms of the formal demands we've seen, I do wish some of them might be a little bit more targeted in an anti-capitalist direction. People were discussing what would that mean to demand the nationalization, the breaking apart of some of the military conglomerates, which just have a massive choke-hold on not just the economy, but everyday life of a lot of ordinary people, just stealing from ordinary people in many ways. What would it mean

ances and their vision. It's really difficult to say. One question would be if there is so much variation among them, is it possible to imagine a broad-based ethnic struggle in solidarity against the military? And that's what people are hoping for. You would have an alliance formed between urban front liners, people from lowland towns, cities, villages, and armed groups in the borderlands who are very well-trained in guerrilla warfare. Well-trained enough to maintain these guerrilla struggles for generations upon generations, which is no minor task at all. Is it possible to imagine a sort of shared political project? It depends on who you ask. For me, and it might depend on people temperamental in style and meanings. I guess I worry that, in the past, even just in the past twenty years, which is not very long, there have been so many times when there have been attempted alliances formed between armed groups and it's always been so difficult to form and maintain any sustainable ethnic alliance, and there are also good reasons for that because there is such variation among the armed groups that for some who might be, in some sense, more principled, how much sense does it really make to line up alongside others that are perhaps less principled? There's been a lot of hope for that solidarity over decades, and it's been unfortunate. It's fallen away time and time again. I hope, like everyone else, that maybe that will change this time. We'll just have to see, I guess.

**John:** For sure. For frontliners / workers... The unions seem like they at least come obviously out of a leftist tradition, based on their flags and slogans and Burma just happening in the past to be completely leftist, but is there some sign of leftist politics or right-wing politics, or is it exclusively to spread democracy, which I don't understand?

**Geoff:** It depends, to be honest, even the largest union federations have been quite active within the democracy movement and also had of significant exiled presence as well, which is great, I think, also places them in a broad liberal political tradition and so even some of the smaller labor organizations, not the trade unions per se, but some of labor NGOs, activist groups that are working in industrial areas. Even these will be hosting human rights trainings, these kinds of activities.

associated with the military and military rule, so I still find it a little bit difficult to use the word Myanmar. They mean the same thing.

**John:** That's the same in my family, especially because I think the official name change happened in 1989 or something, right after the failure of the 1988 uprising, and so I think, there were very sensitive feelings around that, although now I've noticed it seems like even generationally, younger people just grew up saying that, so they say that...

**Geoff:** Yeah, I think that's accurate.

**John:** But I heard Amy Goodman make a big statement about it being like "Burma or, as the military calls it, Myanmar"...

**Geoff:** Oh really? I wouldn't go so [far]. I wouldn't really put it in such stark terms these days.

**John:** Totally, I think it's just a product of maybe her longer activism and age.

**Geoff:** Yeah, could be that for sure.

**John:** Another question I was wondering about, and maybe I'll phrase it in terms of my experience... Growing up with family from Burma, I was really exposed to the anti-Pepsi and Taco Bell campaign's early on, and I think that that really influenced my butting into capitalism, especially by starting to understand the contradictions of growing up in this country, with all this excess and stuff. But then these companies are supporting this government that is killing civilians and enslaving people. All these obvious things. But I was curious if you also had a similar experience.

**Geoff:** Yes and no, I would say that the exiled political world and some of the advocacy groups that have existed in the States, they've had different kinds of things going on. So, on the one hand, as you point out they had these boycott campaigns – and I do think that for sure, for me

as well, those were formative. What they taught me, I would say, is that something like economics, investments: these things are not politically neutral. You have to understand them in a political context and in Burma, for a long time, they were helping to prop up the military regime. So that was a basic thing that I picked up on. On the other hand, in some of the advocacy work and the exiled government world, you also had what became, I would argue, a neo-conservative flavor of activity where you had people all too willing, in my opinion, to reach out to people like Mitch McConnell on the relatively far right end of even the American political spectrum, which is already pretty far right, to begin with, especially after 9/11, and especially with the Bush Doctrine foreign policy of democratization. So there I think I wouldn't necessarily have picked up on a kind of anti-capitalism. But with some of the boycott stuff, I think that's fair to say...

**John: Totally. I remember hearing Bush mention Burma in speeches and being like “Ah, it feels very complicated”, but also democracy is a meaningless word that we love over here. I wanted to also ask if you still have family in Burma.**

**Geoff:** I do. We have family in Yangon. We have a distant family in Pa-kkoku, up by Mandalay and in Mohnyin as well, but the family we're in touch with are in Yangon.

**John: Are they relatively safe with all that stuff?**

**Geoff:** Yeah, they're doing okay, my dad is our contact with them and there's a particular uncle that he's in touch with and they spoke again recently, they've been in touch and they are doing okay. Uncle's sons are staying home. One of them actually has been sending me selfies from protests, but he has been laying a little bit low more recently.

**John: That makes total sense. I was perusing Burmese Instagram and it is interesting – I don't know what your cousin is like, but there does seem to be this whole, I don't know what you call it, a kind of revolutionary shift in people where you could look through their old selfies where it is just a dude working out all the time, working**

barricades, how to deal with tear gas, want to do with smoke bombs, how to treat gunshot wounds, when the shooting starts, what do you do? Do you run, do get low? And how long do you wait? What kind of formations make sense in street battles? That stuff is fantastic, it's priceless almost. For that information sharing and collective knowledge production is totally important. I just wouldn't want to lose sight of some of the different stakes in different places.

For me, at its best, these linkages are internationalist insofar as they maintain a distinction between the oppressor and oppressed people in nations, which is something that I think is lost in a lot of cosmopolitanism discourse where it's like “Oh, these are all young people, Gen Z, millennial, hashtag activists who are just like young people elsewhere, and they are rising up against faceless authoritarians in Asia”. And this framing is a bit of a straw man, to be fair, but I think there is an element of this in terms of how Milktea stuff gets discussed. That I don't think is particularly useful.

**John: If I can spare you from your family for one more question. For the rebel groups that are currently attacking the state in solidarity / just because they were already doing that, but specifically, the KNU being the Karen National Union and the KIA, the Kachin Independence Army, and also maybe the frontliners. Is there a political ideology that any of these groups seem to have other than just nationalism or defending people in a democracy?**

**Geoff:** That's a tough question. To be entirely honest, it's difficult for me to say too much on that, just because the history and politics of the different armed groups is such a huge area. It's not really my area of expertise, but I mean it is fair to say that there's quite a lot of variation, which might sound like a cop-out, but it's true. Some of the armed groups historically have been more likely to embrace broadly left-leaning political visions and others have not. Others have been very sort of right-leaning, ethno-nationalist, anti-communist in many cases, and some linked very closely with the communist insurgency, for example. And the Thai-Burman border is also has had different shifting political winds over time with different armed groups, also shifting their alli-

just a regular anarchist now, it's funny because I think my commitment to revolution or whatever and being able to interact with normal people pushed away from the punk, but it seems like there... And it's the same as in Mexico. Punk and anarchism are very tied together still. Anyhow...

**On the note of southeast Asia, Asian things, I wanted to ask you about clear inspiration from Hong Kong and Thailand, that's been in these demonstrations, especially the early ones, but also the differences, because clearly there are much higher stakes, even though obviously people are fighting for freedom in different ways, but I think one person was shot in Hong Kong and that was the biggest deal in the world. And from friends that were around there, it felt like our American riot were – except for maybe the summer – but where you could step a couple of blocks away and just be shopping, you're going to coffee, just the ways in which the tactics are similar. There are similarities, but also the ways that they're different.**

**Geoff:** No, I think the differences are really worth paying attention to and it has been increasing Milktea Alliance discussion, but actually, I guess it's always been there from the beginning since February. It's sort of an old question with internationalism or cosmopolitanism maybe in some sense. With some of the Milktea stuff, what you get sometimes is collapsing some important distinctions, like the antagonist in Hong Kong, Thailand and Burma are just wildly different, and so the stakes I think it's fair to say are quite a bit higher in Burma, which is nothing against everyone in Hong Kong and Thailand, not at all, but I think that the stakes are higher. The forms that struggle has taken have gone in many ways more militant directions, they had to, and so I wonder sometimes how useful those comparisons are. However, I would say that those connections do seem to resonate with a fair amount of ordinary protesters, demonstrators, front liners. In particular, the kinds of tactical knowledge sharing that we've seen, especially between Hong Kong and Burma or Myanmar, has been really important. In late February, as it became clear that there'll be an escalation in violence, like everyone else, I was sharing these crowd-sourced images in Burmese that came from people in Hong Kong about things like how to build

in an office, and then the next picture is like full militarized black bloc with a shield, and I find it interesting that the Burmese state is incredibly authoritarian, but also people are like "Yeah, I take pictures of myself in riot gear and post it", but I guess it's more dangerous to be shot on the street than the long-distance repression that we are more familiar with here.

**Geoff:** Sure. I was thinking about the discussion over the summer in the States, the George Floyd rebellion stuff and a lot of discussion about like "Make sure you don't take pictures of protesters who aren't masked and maintain anonymity, be very careful", all of which is totally good and then in Burma, it's hilarious how people are posting pictures of themselves, all over the place, in the protests and everything. It's a different kind of threat.

**John:** It'd be clearly an understatement to say that the situation on the ground is changing rapidly, maybe every half-day that I check on the internet. There's updates about different bombings or massacres or the most incredible acts of resistance I've maybe ever seen, but I was curious if you be willing to and could talk a little bit about the most recent changes.

**Geoff:** Sure, as you say, that it's hard to encapsulate everything that is going on and I think that's basically impossible, but at least a few things that I've noticed. I would say, for one thing, certainly we've seen a shift away from some of the mass demonstrations that happened early on in February, where he had these occupations of major intersections, these have fallen away. Security forces have reclaimed a lot of central areas in urban centers and the recurring demonstrations that have continued, have gone a little bit smaller and have tended to take place in tighter residential neighborhoods, where, among other things, it's easier to build stronger barricades. It's easier to maintain disciplined formations with shield bearers at the barricades, a second group in the back dealing with tear gas and then maybe a third group, more general protesters behind them. So you've seen maybe the spatial shift into more residential areas, and in some of those areas, it's been possible to fight the cops and soldiers to a standstill. So there's been recurring holding

patterns in different places. It's hard to make a ton of headway one way or the other by either side basically. And you've also seen a shift towards more peripheral industrial areas of eastern Yangon were Hlaing Tharyar of course. Repression has followed this shift. So it's not like the cops and soldiers retook downtown Yangon and decided to chill. They followed people elsewhere obviously and so Hlaing Tharyar, for example, there was massive bloodshed. It's the largest concentration of factories in the country. Chinese factories were set ablaze. You had this crazy, really intense stories of workers who are armed with shields rushing police lines as live rounds are being used, that kind of tactical implications of which are a little bit difficult to work out, but very striking, very militant and in North Okkalapa, where there is quite a bit of bloodshed, another industrial area.

I would argue as well that actually, as some of the urban centers have been maybe reclaimed at least to a degree by the security forces, rural areas have become maybe more and more important, at least in the south, where I work around Dawei. Dawei town, which was the site of very militant demonstrations for weeks and weeks, has quieted down. I mean, there's still recurring marches and demonstrations, they're smaller. I wouldn't rule out the possibility of more militant activities again, but the villages around Dawei have seen an upsurge in marches, demonstrations, strikes. On Facebook, you see all of the rural areas are underway. It's kind of amazing, they're alive with resistance and in a way that I wouldn't necessarily have expected and that's been really cool to see.

The other big issue is that the Tatmadaw, the Burmese military, has been bombing ethnic areas. The Karen National Union, KNU territory in the east, there's been airstrikes, something like 12,000 people have been displaced, according to the KNU. The Thai government shamefully has been fencing out refugees and the KNU has also been sheltering protesters who fled urban areas, it's the total replay of 1988. And there's talk of protesters training on firearms, hand grenades, tactical strikes on military facilities, a lot of talk of broadening armed struggle. That's where things have gone. I think, as we were chatting before and some of the notes you put together you also mentioned - and I

sume, but it seems like there's a small handful of anarchist punks in Yangon, it's been on the radar of punks and anarchists in other parts of the world, but I think since around the genocide against Rohingya, because I remember seeing punk songs "Fuck racists monks" and stuff like that. They were very present in the early days of the protests and actually still have been, as far as releasing music in solidarity. I've also seen a representation of anarchy signs and black flags at some things, and I was curious if you thought there was...Cause it seems, at least from my perspective, they do mutual aid and it seems they do mutual aid at these demos, but also they are an educational project in some ways. I was wondering if you thought they had any influence on the moment now or if they're just a part of a giant patchwork of things, which makes sense.

**Geoff:** I'd say, they are a part of the patchwork, but I wouldn't want to discount their importance or anything like that. There is this kind of subculture, it's pretty awesome, and they are really active in a lot of leftist scenes in Yangon in particular, and they were, much to their credit on Rohingya stuff, they were really outspoken. They really pissed off some of the monks and ended up apologizing in a ceremonial manner at one point, which I think lost them like a bit of cred, but as someone who's mostly far away, I don't wanna judge them too hard for that, cause what I've seen in terms of their social presence, it's pretty awesome, and as you say, you could see it in educational terms. At a certain point, after 2011 it did become a little bit of a cliche for foreign journalists to come in and do photo shoots with some of the punks and then they would turn up in magazines in western countries. There's a little bit of a head scratch in that sense, because some of the discussion around this was a bit superficial, not that I have super ended up insights on them, but they're part of a larger story. Technically, they are a great influence to have, and the mutual aid work, like Food Not Bombs at their hands, is totally excellent.

**John:** It's interesting, they are a small constellation there, but it seems like there's this whole southeast Asia / southeast Asian Pacific islands punk anarchist world that blossoms in Indonesia. There's thousands of them. As a kid that grew up as an anarchist punk and

areas. So organizations like the Karen Women Organization, similar organizations in Mon State, Shan State, Shan Women's Action Network, in Kachin state as well. I wouldn't put it entirely down to these organizations, but there is a history and a precedent for very strong women leadership in a lot of ethnic areas, and we see that reflected in the current resistance for sure.

I would also say that in Yangon, the industrial workforce is something like 80 or 90 percent women. And the industrial workforce has been absolutely crucial in driving the largest demonstrations early on and then in trying to keep things going right now, and so in that sense as well, you see really strong roles for women, definitely. And a bunch of those unions have really strong woman leaders. people like Ma Moe Sandar Myint for example, really impressive. I think it's also important to recognize that the military, as well as the NLD are both highly patriarchal institutions. So there might be an extra element of opposition that comes from that. The NLD too, of course, has Aun Saung Suu Kyi at its head, but is otherwise a gerontocracy of old men without a lot of strong youth or women and its leadership ranks. So when we see that's the redefining of gender roles in the resistance, I think this is how we have to understand it, maybe in the context of two kinds of patriarchal institutions, civilian, political leadership as well as the military. These are what is being contested through struggle, and I hope we see this continued overturning of those patriarchal power struggles.

In terms of queer participation, it's a little bit more difficult to say. I have seen definitely reporting that emphasizes queer participation, which is also been totally awesome and not something that I've seen at least in 2007 or 1988 as well, but queer politics has been it's a pretty active space in some sense in the last ten years, with a lot of really interesting... Some of them are more liberal civil society oriented organizations and networks, and then some more left-leaning activist work as well, and so this is also what we see reflected in this current resistance and long may it continue.

**John: I have three more questions. Speaking on another group of people that are...I've seen in media, especially in the media I con-**

think this is also really important - is these local administrations have really consolidated or tried to set themselves up apart from the military regime. There's been almost an autonomist streak lately, where you have some ward in neighborhoods that are claiming their own small-scale governments. Oftentimes aligned with the CRPH, which is the formally elected government, I guess we can call them the elected government. So that there is that connection. But there's been this kind of autonomist, maybe anarcho move with some local governments as well, which has been really cool to see. I guess, I'm tempted to think of it in terms of dual power in some sense, but it's maybe a bit early to go too far in that direction

**John: Yeah, it was envisioning in some ways. I guess in a way that I've been trying to not convince but some of my friends and the comrades I have are like... There's a suspect approach towards stuff there, but I think it's because of liberal demands. But also because of just feel like spring revolutions in the past, like the failures of Egypt and all these things. I guess in my mind, this is, despite the horrifying violence that is taking place from the military, almost one of the most ideal revolutionary circumstances that we might see right now. I was going to ask you about this, but there's a general strike and then there's militant resistance. There seems to be almost, not uniform support but pretty close, and then there's guerrillas taking up space on the outside. So, in some ways, it just seems like if the revolution there can't succeed without US intervention or something, there's actually may be very little hope for revolutions to succeed if the military doesn't break apart and doesn't want to give up power anywhere in the world. Maybe that's a little too convoluted...**

**Geoff:** I hear you and I agree. I do think it's pretty fair to say it's a genuinely revolutionary situation where you have a fairly small institution – I mean, it's a big institution but relative to the entire country, it's not huge – trying to cling onto power right now with absolutely zero or next to zero hegemonic purchase, let's say. Nobody likes the military. And there's been this militant resistance that's really electrified the country, literally from Putao, just like the Himalayan foothills and

far north Kachin down to the Kawthaung, which is the farthest point south, right north of Phuket in southern Thailand.

It's been really interesting and in some ways surprising, because I think, for a long time, a lot of us who were working in Burma or paying attention would look to Thailand for the last ten years and see the kinds of popular struggles that have erupted at different points. The Red Shirt struggle, the occupation of downtown Bangkok, even the Yellow Shirt occupation of the airport which has had awful political principles, but was an impressive popular struggle. And we'd look at them and say, "That's amazing, but it's hard to imagine in Burma just because of the openly violent nature of the military. They would just start shooting right away and blood would run and it'd be impossible to maintain anything," and we have obviously seen violent repression and there have been 550 people killed. This is intolerable, but people are coming back and there seems to be this resilience, this unwillingness to bend. It's really amazing. It's hard to find the words, it feels silly to say it's amazing, but I don't know what else to say.

**John:** I don't have Twitter, but I looked at your Twitter and it appears that you are like me or you just spend most of your non-working or whatever time, looking up news from Burma and following other accounts, but I might spend about an hour a day off and I'm crying in either sadness or that kind of being moved crying. Especially, I think, for me at least, and maybe we can talk about this more, but it's across every ethnicity in the country, it seems like people are resisting and people are dying. And you see these funerals with Muslim coffins, you see funerals of Buddhists and Christians and I assume, animists. But there's something about that unity that maybe you can speak more, but it seems not like something I could have imagined coming from Myanmar Burma five years ago with situations like Rohingya and the Kachins and just different situations that just... It's very moving, I guess.

**Geoff:** Sure, what's happened is surprising and it is not surprising. I'm as surprised as you are. I think, if it's not surprising, it's only because, this is very vague and abstract, I guess, but as we've seen with revolutionary struggles at different points in history, solidarity is formed

but I don't know if you saw this but right before we talked, I was looking online and one of the Burmese news sites was reporting that a Chinese ambassador actually started talking with the shadow government and has actually made phone calls. It's just an interesting development, it appears that China is probably just waiting and seeing how this goes, and so I imagine they are hedging their bets.

**Geoff:** There's been a lot of speculation about China's position relative to evidence that happened in the past couple of months. And then there's this popular misconception, I think it's fair to say, that China has somehow been backing the military to the hilt has been supporting this coup. As far as I'm aware, there's no evidence for that. The Chinese ambassador even made a very rare move of giving an interview in which he said that the coup is not something they want to see and, as you say, they've made overtures to the CRPH as well. There's a lot of Chinese investment in Burma, and the Belt and Road Initiative runs through the China-Myanmar economic corridor in the western part of the country, they look to work with whoever ends up consolidating power. I think that's fair to say.

**John:** I hope, no one reads us as us being like "Tankies" or "defend the honor China", but I think China's just does whatever is good for their economics.

Okay, I had a question about the demographics of the protests. I've read a couple of articles discussing the central role of women in protests, and especially I was reading about in ethnic regions and that also I've seen some photos and a couple of articles about queer participation in the demonstrations, and I was curious if obviously, you're outside of Burma right now, but if it seems like there is a re-defining gender roles coming about through struggle.

**Geoff:** I think there's been some of that. I think a little bit like with the earlier question that we'll see how it goes because there's a long way to go. But it's been powerful, encouraging to see what we've seen. As you say, I think it is fair to say that there is quite a strong institutional infrastructure for women's organizations in a lot of different ethnic

**I could see, but I was wondering if you thought this was accurate. Obviously, who knows, but if you felt if there are key differences here?**

**Geoff:** Yeah, I've seen that comparison a lot as well. I guess I can understand why people raise that. I don't think it's particularly likely. For one thing, as we've seen with 1988 in the past, and we've seen urban protesters go to the jungle and try to build a more generalized armed uprising beyond, as you said, the civil war that has been simmering for a long time regardless. And that has never really taken off, and I think part of the reason why we haven't seen a kind of Syria-like conflagration and it is just because their regional interests are entirely different in terms of neighboring countries, in terms of people who might want to be running weapons into the country or training insurgents. There's this destabilizing influence of the US, but not only the US, in Syria has been maybe the main factor in some ways. And as I said before, I just don't see the US having any interest in doing anything like that in Burma. There have been reports of Chinese troops massing at the border, and even there, I doubt very much that it would come to that. The Chinese government has had different kinds of positions over the years. They've supported some of the armed groups in the border areas much to the military's chagrin, but they've also not been happy at all to have any refugee flows coming into China. It would be quite hard to imagine a Chinese military intervention and I don't think the US, certainly not Thailand or India. That's the big difference to me with Syria. You had a great power struggle that took place in Syria and I don't think that struggle gonna be happening in Burma.

**John: That makes sense. I didn't even think about that. I was thinking about how there is this shadow government that, in theory, does have a bunch of functionaries already set up waiting to take over, although obviously, they don't have the economic ties that the military does, but it does seem a little bit more united, but it does seem like there is more centralization, maybe for the revolutionary side.**

**Not that I want to give credit to the NLD, or that I like them, but they have been serving as state functionaries since 2011 or 2014,**

in struggle and it's not always something that you can assume beforehand. And I think that's kind of what we have seen here. There's a lot of talk of unity. Unity is a term that occurs and recurs across political discourse in Burma a lot. I'm who is... One of my minor acts of...it's not really resistance. But friends in the south, in Dawei, around this big project, when we've had unity in our materials. I always like to try and go and cross it out and put solidarity instead.

**John: Yeah, I guess, solidarity is a better word. You are right though.**

**Geoff:** It's been really powerful to see that. It's difficult to gauge, at least from where I am, which is quite far away, I should say. It's difficult to gauge how much, how deep is this kind of reconsideration has gone. So when we've seen on social media people like these sort of effusive claims about Rohingya stuff, like "oh, we got it wrong. I can't believe we've swallowed the military's propaganda about this. We need to do better than this", this sort of thing. There have been a lot of these statements. I don't know how to quantify that. Having seen what's happened in the last ten years and obviously not only the last ten years, not only Rohingya stuff, it does seem to me that some of these divides run pretty deep, and I hope that what we're seeing is the beginning of the transcendence. But it's difficult to say for sure.

**John: That's also my fear, I guess, is that people will forget again that in 2007, the military killing people in the Saffron Revolution, but seven years later them supporting the military killing other people that are an ethnic minority. I hinted at this, but I just wanted to ask the question that I think is maybe hard to answer or ask, but do you think that there is a chance that this revolution can win?**

**Geoff:** Absolutely! I do think so. Is there a chance? There's definitely a chance! I find prediction to be quite difficult. Here's some things I don't think.

**John: That makes more sense.**

**Geoff:** I don't think outside intervention of one kind or another is

something that anyone can count on. I don't think that the United Nations, I don't think that responsibility to protect, I don't think the US of all countries, I don't think these are realistic things to pin one's hopes on. If there's something that I would hold on to, it is this recurring willingness to return to the streets, return to urban centers, to keep the marches going, keep the strikes going.

The question is: how can that be maintained and to whatever extent even scaled up and generalized even more – where possible? I think for me, that's the decisive factor. It seems to me, everything depends on that. There's been a lot of discussions understandably, and I'm not super involved in it, so I can't really speak to it in a ton of detail, but a lot of strategic discussion about the CRPH, about Dr Sasa, about their relationship to the general strike committee or the general strike committee of nationalities and their attempts to woo different people in New York and Washington DC, and how to spin up an alternative government and how do you legitimate it, and how do you take over some of the economic channels that the military has? I think those are important things to consider. Oh, and security council action as well. I'm not against working on all that stuff, but I do think that if you can manage to get something done at the security council, it's not gonna matter if people aren't out in the streets, if the strikes and demonstrations and marches aren't happening. If it's not possible to show mass defiance of the military, then I don't think that elite civil society or alternative government strategies are gonna have very much traction.

**John: Yeah, totally. I was wondering if you thought there would be any potential for breaking apart the unity of the military? Because it seems like that's also an important part of the revolution, and we didn't really see that in 1988. There was some defection of maybe airforce folks and police, we've seen the police more willing to break away. It seems like recently there was an attack on a police station, by a former police officer in Kalay, which has been a really big site of resistance. But the former cop in regaining his humanity by attacking the police was killed in the process, which is sad, but also a true hero. He lead an attack on the police, so it seems like the police are more likely to break, but I guess I haven't seen in history**

**the Burmese military break apart. And it does seem like that tends to be how revolutions succeed, right?**

**Geoff:** That's the historical precedent, it's true. I can't really speak to that historical precedent so much, but my sense is that is the case. In terms of the military and the police, what we see is that these are two institutions that are not the same. The police as an institution has a different kind of presents, it's not as closed. The military is often referred to as a state within the state, and the history of the institution going back to, let's say, the 1950's really consolidated itself in the post-colonial period. It really understood itself as the sole guarantor of national unity. There's that word again. I think some people think that that was a claim that they try to make. That was not like something that they could really protect, but this was really their genuine self-understanding in some sense, and I think in many ways that remains the case today. From what I understand, the military really is this quite closed off institution in terms of schooling, in terms of residential arrangements. I think that helps to explain why we've seen defections from the police and not so much the military. But hopefully, at least, you can imagine that in a hierarchical institution like this, you could see people who are not at the top of that hierarchy understanding that what might seem obvious to us, which is that this institution does not have their interests at heart and that perhaps there is a line or fracture that one could identify and that might take shape. I'm not a keen analyst of the military. I can't really say too much more than that. I've been interested to track some of their economic activities, but in terms of their internal community, it seems to be pretty solid, unfortunately.

**John: With the recent up tick of ethnic armed organizations, either actively throwing their support behind the protests or tacitly making statements about it, and then also with some protesters going up to the mountains or down to the mountains and maybe getting training, people have been talking a lot about civil war, and there already is a civil war going on in Burma. There has been war since forever literally, it seems since World War II, right before independence even. But I guess they mean a full nationwide civil war and a lot of western media is fretting that it would be a new Syria, which**