

# A GANDHIAN ROUTE IN MYANMAR

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Myanmar

A police officer pays respect to Myanmar nun Sister Ann Rose Nu Tawng as she kneels in front of police officers to ask security forces to refrain from violence against children and residents amid anti-coup protests in Myitkyina, Myanmar on March 8, 2021, in this still image taken from video. | Photo Credit: [Reuters](#)

Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 while she was still under house arrest in Myanmar. In a lecture in 2012, she described the award as a recognition that “the oppressed and the isolated in Burma were also a part of the world, that they were recognising the oneness of humanity”. It is ironical that 30 years later, the Nobel laureate, who turned a blind eye to the suffering of the Rohingya Muslims in her country, is now back under house arrest imposed by the military junta in Myanmar.

Several weeks of non-violent demonstrations and a deadly crackdown have roiled the nation since the military coup d'état on February 1, which brought back full military reign following several years of a quasi-electoral rule. However, the most important part about the coup is not the house arrest of Ms. Suu Kyi, but the unstoppable non-violent civil resistance of the Myanmar population. It is as if once again, the Myanmar people have come to regard the Gandhian concept of non-violence as a radically shared social contract that bolsters the intervention of the ethical in politics. Despite the security forces' harsh methods against protesters, the anti-coup sentiments in Myanmar have so far been non-violent and peaceful.

Mahatma Gandhi chose a spinning wheel as a symbol for his idea of non-violence. It represented two messages: the wheel was the main instrument to protest against India's growing industrialism, and it was also a symbol of resistance to the British-made clothes that had replaced Indian handmade clothes. In the United States, Martin Luther King turned to the symbol of the “American Dream” as a hope of social justice and equity for every member of the American society. Today, the three-fingered salute that was adopted by activists in Thailand has become a strong symbol of resistance for democracy in Myanmar.

The growing interest among the new generation of Myanmar activists in Gandhian non-violence is not a new phenomenon. For a long time, during her previous house arrest, Ms. Suu Kyi's Buddhist spirituality provided her with a moral strength in the direction of non-violent resistance. “Non-violence means positive action. You have to work for whatever you want. You don't just sit there doing nothing and hope to get what you want. It just means that the methods you use are not violent ones. Some people think that non-violence is passiveness. It's not so,” she said in an interview many years ago.

Her message is in tune with that of peaceful protesters who defy fear. As such, there are many similarities with Ms. Suu Kyi's argument, which underlined the fact that “it is not power that corrupts but fear. Fear of losing power corrupts those who wield it and fear of the scourge of power corrupts those who are subject to it”. Ms. Suu Kyi saw the non-violent revolution in Myanmar as an attempt by the people to act as the Buddha taught. In Buddhism, she argued, “each man has in him the potential” to realise this. But “under despotic rule, man is valued least, as a faceless, mindless — and helpless — mass to be manipulated at will”.

Today, at the centre of Myanmar's protest movement, the core quality is inner strength. It is the spiritual steadiness that comes from the belief that non-violent resistance is right, even if it does not bring down the military junta immediately. This is what the late Czech dissident and artist,

Václav Havel, called “the power of the powerless”. What the young Myanmar protesters represent is that the powerless do have power, and that power can be manipulated through non-violent means.

Let us also not forget that the protesters’ quest for democracy not only presents serious challenges to the authority of the military power in Myanmar and its legitimacy, but also questions the democratic nature of all those global powers that put into question the authenticity of the non-violent resistance of the Myanmar population.

Gandhi associated politics with ethics. He once wrote: “I have always derived my politics from ethics or religion and my strength is also derived by my deriving my politics from ethics. It is also because I swear by ethics and religion that I find myself in politics. A person who is a lover of his country is bound to take a lively interest in politics.”

The future of Myanmar is not up to the military, it is up to those who follow the example of Gandhi in the streets of Yangon and Mandalay. The military and dictatorial powers in the country are trying to exorcise this spectre, but the winds of Gandhian non-violence are once again blowing strong and are unlikely to dissipate soon.

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