

## **2021 Shorenstein Journalism Award**

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### **Swe Win**

Editor-in-Chief, *Myanmar Now*

2021 Award Recipient

### **Myanmar Back into Darkness**

Thank you, Professor Shin and all the organizers and everyone who contributed to this event. I am very honored to be here today. Let me take this opportunity to share a little bit about what has happened in our country since February.

The military coup in Myanmar earlier this year put an abrupt end to all our hopes for democracy and liberty. Located right between India and China, our country is rich in land and resources, but has long been impoverished by decades of military mismanagement, exploitation, and brutal oppression.

We initially opened to limited democratic reforms in 2011. Just as we experienced such a delicious taste of tiny bit of democracy, we also witnessed enormous, horrible crimes committed against the Muslim minority in our country.

When the military junta launched the coup, any political gains that had been made over the past decade were terminated. To justify the attempted seizure of power, the military used the pretense of fraud in the November 2020 general elections, in which Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy won a resounding victory. No credible evidence has been provided to support the junta's claims. The military junta started a legend about the potential voter fraud even before the elections were held, similar to what happened in the United States last year. If it weren't for the United States' Constitution and democracy, we cannot imagine how things would be taking place in your part of the world right now.

Currently the Military Council in our country has pledged to hold new elections after an emergency period which is expected to last at least two years, but very few people take these pledges seriously. We see the country not only being changed back into the repressive military state we remember from earlier years, but also being shaped into a nation not unlike

North Korea. Every form of free speech is brutally suppressed now. There is no space left for any freedom.

But having experienced a brief period of democracy, which we found so delicious, and the universal appeal of democracy, Myanmar's public has responded to the coup with mass protests, a civil disobedience movement in which thousands of government employees refuse to go to work and, most recently, a youth-led resistance.

To date, more than 1000 civilians have been murdered by the junta and thousands of people have been incarcerated.

One of the major victims of the coup has been the independent press, which emerged as a feature of our country's limited democracy over the past decade.

After February 1, newsrooms were raided, and several publications, including *Myanmar Now*, which I work for, had their operating licenses revoked and their websites blocked. Most of the staff of the news outlets targeted by the junta were forced to flee to territories along the country's border areas controlled by ethnic organizations. From there, they continue their professional work despite enormous logistical difficulties.

Dozens of journalists have been arrested, and only a few were released. In June, Amanda, a female multimedia reporter from our newsroom [was arrested]. Also, a brilliant and good-hearted 37-year-old American journalist called Danny Fenster, who previously worked with *Myanmar Now*, has been detained in Yangon's prison for more than 140 days on grounds that he was inciting against the state and that he was working for an illegal organization.

Newsgathering on the ground, in Yangon and other parts of the country, is very dangerous. There is an unprecedented level of surveillance over journalists' work. The reporters inside the country can no longer identify themselves as working with *Myanmar Now* or other banned news outlets. If we conduct interviews, by phone or in person, we now run the risk of being arrested if someone reports the activity to the military authorities.

Soldiers and police in Yangon and major cities have been known to randomly check the mobile phones of civilians and explore their social media accounts and photo galleries.

Any criticism of the military junta, even a mere suggestion of sympathy with the resistance movement, is easily interpreted as an indication that the individual is a dissident or, worse, a terrorist. Immediate arrest usually follows.

The future of the media in Myanmar is bleak. State-run news outlets have now begun to support military propaganda. There are no options left for professional reporters to work independently under the junta.

The group of reporters and editors who have fled to the country's borders now serve as the media backbone of our day-to-day news operations.

Private media back inside the country who are still allowed to legally operate now appear to be faced with two options: avoid criticism of the junta or support the military propaganda.

Over the past decade, we have been eagerly waiting and working for the day when we could finally shut all remnants of the military dictatorship from our lives, but now we are back in the darkness. Still, we remain very much positive about our future. We strongly believe this is an opportunity for greater and better changes in our country.

Thank you, thank you very much.