Dancing with the Junta Again

Mistreatment of Women Activists by the Tatmadaw Following the Military Coup in Myanmar

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ABSTRACT: Since the military coup on 1 February, more than 800 people, including children have been killed and more than 6,000 people have been arrested. The death toll and number of incarcerated women is sharply increasing during the crack down on protesters by security forces; yet, little is known about the specific challenges and opportunities encountered by women activists while imprisoned. Through analysis of semi-structured interviews with five women who have been detained in connection with the military coup, this report sheds light on the torture, sexual harassment and poor prison conditions that they face.

KEYWORDS: activists, military coup, Myanmar, prison, torture, women

On 1 February, when the newly elected officials were supposed to be sworn in as Members of Parliament a military coup took place in Myanmar. In the past, Myanmar has been ruled by military juntas for more than half a century, but within the last decade the country had taken significant steps towards democracy. With the coup, Myanmar returned to an authoritarian political regime oppressing the people through use of brute force. Simultaneously, a tradition for activism and opposition to the military regime was revived. Though the country appeared to be changing, neither authoritarianism nor the opposition against it had ever completely disappeared. Now, both are again flourishing.

On 8 March, International Women's Day, colourful clothing lines appeared across the streets of cities in Myanmar. On them hang *htameins*, the beautiful sarongs women traditionally wear in Myanmar. These clothing lines were part of what is known as the '*htamein* revolution'. According to conservative beliefs, female energy can contaminate the male energy described as *hpon*. A man's *hpon* can be damaged if he passes under a woman's *htamein* or if his clothes are washed with a woman's lower garments (i.e. un-

derwear or *htamein*). The current protest movement has turned such beliefs to their advantage. Protesters have done so by hanging laundry lines with *htameins* across the streets, thereby forcing soldiers to spend time taking the laundry line barricades down before continuing on. So while soldiers have spent time taking down laundry lines, out of fear of damaging their *hpon* and thereby increasing their risk of dying in battle, protesters have used that time to seek safety. These beliefs were also used to offend Min Aung Hlaing, the leader of the military and current dictator: as the protesters glued his picture on menstrual pads. Such creative tactics are not only clever non-violent protest strategies, they also indicate a difference in gender norms between the protest movement and the Tatmadaw. While the Tatmadaw holds on to old beliefs, the protest movement has taken the questioning of such beliefs to a new level for Myanmar.

Women have been at the forefront of the resistance to the military coup in Myanmar. Historically, women have taken part in uprisings against military juntas before. By doing so, every woman who participated in the resistance has challenged traditional beliefs, according to which women should concern them-

selves with domestic matters, while political matters only concern men (Burmese Women's Union and Assistance Association for Political Prisoners 2004). Previous generations of female activists, politicians and political prisoners have challenged such beliefs through their participation in the resistance. Now, female activists are not only challenging gender norms through their participation in politics, but attacking conservative gender norms head on through the *htamein* revolution and by playing significant roles at the forefront of the resistance movement.

Previous anthropological studies have shown how in liminal times such as a revolution social structures melt into anti-structures that are reconfigured after the revolution (Horvath et al. 2015). While it is yet unknown how social structures will settle after this crisis, the prominent role of women in the protest movement is already leading to effects in the form of high numbers of women being among the people who have been arrested since the coup. When detained by male-dominated security forces, these women are at particular risk of abuse and sexual torture. The following analysis builds on interviews with five women activists who have been detained by security forces since the coup. The interviews confirmed that activists are currently facing torture, sexual harassment and poor conditions when detained by the security forces, and that women are at particular risk of sexual harassment.

Since the military coup in February, more than 800 people, including women activists, have been killed; others have gone underground while facing arrest orders; and finally some have been detained with or without charges. This article discusses the mistreatment women activists face when detained by the security forces. The discussion is focussed on three forms of mistreatment in particular: (1) torture; (2) sexual harassment; and (3) poor prison conditions.

Torture

Most interviewees recounted that female detainees were subjected to violence during arrest by policemen and/or soldiers. Torture during arrest and interrogation is not a new practice in Myanmar; it is commonly exercised by security forces in ethnic conflicts, in military interrogation camps and in prisons. In connection with the military coup, there has also been examples of such punishment being used outside prisons in public areas in bright daylight. Security forces typically move in on demonstrations,

unprovoked and without warning, waving their batons and shooting live ammunition and even firing grenades (Myanmar Now 2021). The arrested demonstrators are ordered to get into a squat position with lowered head and hands folded on their back (Gerin 2021). While in this position, they face abuse and insults and are repeatedly hit all over their bodies with batons and rifle butts (Frontier Myanmar 2021). In some cases, detainees have even been shot close up by officers during this kind of harassment (BBC 2021).

One of the protesters interviewed experienced this kind of torture first-hand. EE is a young woman activist. She was participating in a demonstration as she had done on previous days together with other women activists. She was arrested together with her sister, when they joined the "Milk Tea Alliance" demonstration on 28 March 2021, in which more than 400 women were detained in a single day. She said:

I have never met such a brutal crackdown before . . . As I arrived there, I took my packet from my bag and started shouting with the other demonstrators. After a while, one demonstrator suddenly shouted at us to run, this was an emergency. They [the policemen and soldiers] were running and trying to catch peaceful demonstrators. I tried to find a way to escape from their arrest. Unfortunately, I chose a street where the policemen had already taken place, and then some policemen also followed us. My sister and I were trapped. While we were running, some demonstrators accidentally hit my sister and then she fell to the ground. As I tried to lift her, the policemen caught us. I could fight as they arrested us, yet if I was injured while fighting with these evils, I believed that I couldn't receive medical treatment while in prison. That's why I was easily caught. They also warned, 'If you guys run or try to escape, we will beat you seriously'. An aggressive policeman repeatedly kicked my sister; she fell on the ground again while I was held by two policemen. I could not help my sister who was being beaten in several places. She couldn't stand by herself. I saw her legs and her back were bruised. Two policemen lifted my sister into the jail truck. I was also taken away.

In this tragic event, EE and her sister were participants in daily demonstrations like other activists. Though they had marched before, they had not experienced anything like this. They peacefully demanded their rights and pushed for the country to be set free from the military regime. But they were unaware of the brutal force that the military was then using against demonstrations. EE recounted how soldiers and policemen strategically occupied streets to catch

demonstrators who ran away from crackdowns. This demonstration turned into a battlefield, where peaceful demonstrators were treated like prisoners of war in the ethnic areas of Myanmar. They were brutally beaten and arrested or killed. The arrested female prisoners had some knowledge of the prison situation, where detainees only had limited access to medical treatment. Therefore, EE and her sister did not try to escape when they were arrested. Still, her sister was beaten and kicked by officers, even when she obeyed their orders. Her sister's legs were seriously injured such that she was unable to stand and walk. Such violence has become commonplace during arrests by the security forces. Though it can seem counter-intuitive, the military regime justifies such violence by officers as necessary to maintain social order. According to them, the Tatmadaw is the guardian of Myanmar, and the actions of officers are merely a response to violent behaviours of the activists.

EE continued to describe how there were so many detainees in the jail truck that they could hardly get enough air from the tiny windows. This led detainees to panic, get headaches and go into shock. She felt like the intense enclosure of the truck was designed as a form of asphyxia torture. She said:

I felt so upset while in this truck. There were so many people I suffocated, the smell was noxious, and it was so messy. Nobody could breathe well. Some women were getting headaches, and a woman, I remember, suddenly fell down on the ground while she was shouting 'I can't breathe anymore. I am getting intense headaches'. Some older women approached her and shouted: 'This is my niece. She suffers from heart disease'. . . We were put in the jail truck for a long time, not allowed to go to the toilet and eat foods. I guess I stayed there for more than nine hours with 65 people in this dark truck. It was hard to breathe, we even took off our masks. It seemed that they wanted to make us suffer.

The detainees in the truck were a mix of men and women. They did not know where they were going, and they were strictly prohibited to inform family members and lawyers that they had been arrested. Thus, these are unlawful arrests where detainees were neither informed of their rights nor told what charges they faced, and where many detainees faced violence during arrest. Additionally, they were kept incommunicado, which prevented families or lawyers from assisting the arrested and which created a widespread fear amongst the families of detainees who did not know if their family members were hiding in safety, arrested or even dead.

Sexual Harassment

Sexual violence is known to be used as a weapon of war by the Myanmar security forces in conflict areas (UN 2021). Most recent examples stem from the conflict in Rakhine and include systematic use of rape against Rohingya women. It is therefore worth noting that some of the battalions accused of these horrible acts have been stationed in Yangon and Mandalay in connection with the military coup (Mathieson 2021). As troops have been moved from the conflict zone in Rakhine, the practices of rape and other sexual violent crimes have moved with them to the fight against protestors against the military coup. These repeating patterns of sexual violence were also present in accounts given by the women we interviewed. TT was rudely insulted and threatened with rape by the security forces while in prison. She said:

This day, I joined the demonstration where there were protestors sitting and shouting slogans against the military coup in front of the Ocean Supermarket. A few minutes later, policemen and soldiers ran towards us and hit us with batons. So many demonstrators were seriously injured, and others narrowly escaped. Unfortunately, I and my friend were caught. They shouted at women protestors: "Fucking dog daughters, we will rape and kill you all!" They continuously beat and insulted us. When we were put in the jail truck, they seized our smart phones. I and my friend couldn't contact our family members immediately. We were worrying about their threats. I learnt that they typically raped people after their arrest or while in the detention. At the time, I was extremely frightened about with the pains of a sexual assault.

In this case, the security forces brutally targeted female protesters physically and mentally through sexual harassment. TT was aware that sexual harassment is a common practice amongst policemen and soldiers. She had heard how other protesters had faced threats of rape and knew of other female detainees who had experienced rape. This was a situation that caused TT much fear while in detention. Even for those who are 'lucky' enough to only be subjected to threats of rape, such experiences can be deeply traumatising and have effects that linger many years after the event or events that cause them.

MW, a friend of TT who also participated in the protests, also experienced sexual harassment while in prison. She said:

Two policemen lifted me into the police truck. I was stunned from being whacked by security forces.

Yet, I heard their abusive words inside the truck . . . When I arrived at the prison, the prison staff put me in the male prison because I wore a man's shirt and shorts. I complained that I was a girl, not a man. Yet, they didn't believe what I was saying. They ordered me to take off my clothes and checked my bosom. Even though I showed it, male staff were dissatisfied with it. One of male staff touched my vagina with his hand. And then, he told me off abusively: 'Fucking daughter, why did you wear these attires like men?' And then, they put me in the female prison. I felt so embarrassed. I don't want to talk about it anymore.

This case is an example of how clashes between the conservative gender norms of the Tatmadaw and more progressive views in the protest movement, which allow a girl to wear shorts and a shirt, can lead to the harassment of women protesters. Though wearing male clothes, MW looks like a woman. It is hard to establish whether prison staff knew from the start that she was a woman or at what point they realised that she was telling the truth. However, if there was a need for an examination, standard procedures would call for such an examination to be performed by female staff with respect for the person's dignity and, where possible, in a private setting. Instead, the examination was conducted in an unacceptable manner as she was forced to strip in front of male staff who proceeded to touch her genitals. This harassment left psychological scars on MW, who felt humiliated and intimidated.

Though we cannot establish the extent of sexual harassment based on the five interviews we conducted, the examples presented by the interviewees and their description of harassment and threats of rape by the security forces as common suggest that a culture of sexual violations, impunity and lack of respect for women, which has previously been seen in conflict areas, continues to exist within the Tatmadaw.

Poor Prison Conditions

The interviewees described the conditions inside prisons as overcrowded, with no COVID-19 precautions, and with a lack of sleeping space, a lack of privacy on the open toilets, a lack of access to these toilets, a lack of drinking water, a lack of nutritious food and a lack of medical treatment for the injuries that they had acquired during arrest. Regarding overcrowded spaces, TT reported:

When in the prison hall, we felt like hell. This hall was too hot. It did not have fans. The hall was filled

with so many prisoners . . . We had to sleep closely together.

While such conditions are challenging in and of themselves, the situation is worsened for the detainees by the presence of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases inside the prison. Though Myanmar has gone through several lockdowns to prevent major COVID-19 outbreaks, and overcrowded prisons across the country have taken precautions to prevent the disease from entering their premises, none of these precautions were taken when the protesters were detained.

In addition, the women detainees were limited to only having 15 minutes for bathing and doing laundry twice a day. In this short time, they had problems with more senior prisoners, including the person in charge of the bathing area, and they had a lack of privacy, as male prisoners were able to look over a fence and into the shower area. BF, a protester who was detained for 28 days, said:

After moving to the prison cell, we had to stay with convicted prisoners. I noticed a woman, who was called the '*Ye Board Kaine* prisoner' ['manager of the bathroom']. She was aggressive and often insulted us. She pressured us to hurry taking a bath. She put nine of her junior prisoners near our showering place. It meant if we shouted at her, they would beat us. She looked like a gangster. We requested a high rank staff to remove her while we were in the bathroom. This request was accepted. But another problem was the open design of bathrooms, which were located near the male prison yard. While women were bathing, male prisoners were watching and teasing them. We complained to the female staff and asked her not to allow these guys watching while female detainees were taking a bath. The female staff said that 'we don't have the power to control them. Only male prison staff could order them'. They totally neglected our safety and privacy.

It can be hard for newcomers to find their place in the prison hierarchy (Gaborit 2020). While detained, the activists did not only have to deal with the formal authority of prison staff, but also with the orders from the prisoner in charge of the bathroom. If they did not obey, they risked corporal punishment by her helpers. When the detained protesters complained and asked to shower without the presence of the bathroom manager, the prison staff allowed them to do so. However, though the female prison staff showed a willingness to help the prisoners, they were unable to do so for the issues that reached beyond the compound for female prisoners. The male prisoners watching female prisoners showering from

another compound were governed by male prison staff. And, like the female prisoners face unequal treatment based on their gender, so do the female prison staff. While they can solve minor issues within the compound, the power to solve anything that reaches beyond the compound lies with their male counterparts and superiors.

Detainees were limited not only in their access to water for showering, but also in access to clean drinking water. Several interviewees recounted that pure drinking water was not available and that some had to drink dirty water that caused diarrhoea instead. BF recounted:

The water had a yellow colour, it was not clear. We had no choice but to drink it. This water made two detainees suffer diarrhoea at night.

On top of the health risks of staying in an overcrowded prison during a pandemic, and lacking access to healthcare, there was the health risk of drinking contaminated water as a way to avoid dehydration. All these factors, combined with poor food provisions that provide little nutrition, place the prisoners at a greater risk of getting sick. Under such conditions, even minor diseases can become major health issues. At one point, FB witnessed a situation where another prisoner was in need of medical care. She said:

I had a tragic experience of the prison medical provision. While in prison, I met a girl who worked as a journalist at [a local news outlet]. She was suffering cramps and a stomach-ache . . . After two days, her stomach problem got worse and was very intense at night. At the time, I called for staff to come urgently. Staff brought a female prisoner with medical knowledge to check whether she was seriously ill. She checked her hand through the bars, did not even open our cell. She said: 'I will inject her intravenously'. We strongly rejected this treatment. She didn't know her disease well. I asked: 'If she has problems, will you take the responsibility for it?' She didn't want any responsibility for the treatment. When the prisoner became a little conscious, I asked her whether she wanted to receive the treatment or not. Her head and eyes swayed at me to reject the treatment. So, I required that they returned her medicine which was confiscated at the prison gate. Eventually, staff brought it back to her.

In this case, two issues were at stake. The first was that the prisoner could no longer access treatment for her existing medical condition. Only after a request by her fellow inmates was she able to get back the medicine that she had with her when arrested. Once she ran out of medicine, a new problem would arise.

The second was the lack of healthcare in the prison. Once the prison staff responded to the call for medical assistance, they did not bring a health professional, but rather another prisoner with knowledge about health issues, a prisoner who was not even allowed to examine the patient properly, but only to give treatment through the bars of the cell door. Such practices risk not only depriving prisoners of proper treatment but also causing them further harm.

After Release

The five women we interviewed all survived the torture, sexual harassment and poor prison conditions, but their hardships did not end at their release. They were released into a society where the military junta was still in power and the fight of the resistance movement had to go on. And as they rejoined the fight, our interviews had to be scheduled around their participation in street protests. Though they had rejoined the fight, they were affected by their experiences in the prison. EE recounted:

When I came back home, I suffered from insomnia, and my sister was seriously ill. I always have the same nightmare about the arrest and the prison when I sleep. In my nightmare, I hear gun shots, I am arrested again, and thrown into the prison. This repeated nightmare disrupts my sleep. Sometimes, I don't want to sleep because of this nightmare. I can't eat very well. I don't know what time I should eat or go to do something. When I eat a small biscuit, I feel full and then don't want to eat for days. I feel alone and depressed. I have had insomnia for a week . . . When I was released, I saw they shot demonstrators in front of my apartment. That made me relive my tragic experiences of the arrest and the prison again . . . I try to control myself to forget this memory by doing meditation and praying to the Buddha.

The insomnia caused EE to lose interest in and no longer take pleasure in her normal daily activities. Meanwhile, the continued presence of armed officers in her surroundings and the health problems her sister had acquired during arrest and imprisonment served as a constant reminder of the traumatic experiences she had. EE sought comfort in practising meditation and praying to the Buddha, but, as many others, EE continues to be affected by what she has lived through. This is the result of the combined physical and psychological abuse the Tatmadaw subjects protesters to through torture, sexual harassment and imprisonment.

Conclusion

The five interviews with women activists who were detained after the military coup revealed the widespread use of torture and sexual harassment and the existence of highly problematic prison conditions. The endeavour of this report is not to establish whether women are more or less at risk than men. It is clear from our data and from general information about the current situation in Myanmar that all people arrested by the Tatmadaw face serious human rights violations, torture and, for many, also death. We set out to understand the patterns of this widespread violence by focussing on one particular group of detainees. We focussed on women because of the prominent role they play in the resistance movement and because of the lack of research about the experiences of women in prison. Similarly, there is a need for knowledge and documentation of the particular patterns of violence committed against other groups, such as ethnic minorities, members of the LGBT community and people with disabilities. Knowledge about the particular patterns of violations against various groups contributes to a deeper understanding of the atrocities happening now and lays the first stone on the road to the prevention of such violations in the future.

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