

STOLEN FREEDOMS

CREATIVE EXPRESSION, HISTORIC
RESISTANCE, AND THE MYANMAR COUP



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On February 1, 2021, Myanmar’s military launched a violent coup to overthrow the country’s democratically-elected government in response to the landslide November 2020 electoral victory of Myanmar’s *de facto* leader, State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy.

Creative artists, including writers, poets, filmmakers, painters, musicians, satirists, graphic artists, and others, have been among the vanguard of the public response to the coup, using their creative tools to denounce the coup, to defend the freedoms gained during the country’s 10-year political opening, and to call for greater change. They have built upon decades of creative protest in Myanmar, from the popular and outspoken pro-independence songs of the 1930s, to the elusive but subversive poetry of the 1970s and 1988, to the mocking satire of the early 2000s.

The military’s retaliation to this public response has been swift and violent.

PEN America’s report *Stolen Freedoms: Creative Expression, Historic Resistance, and the Myanmar Coup* explores the creative response to the coup and the military’s retaliatory crackdown, framing it within Myanmar’s long history of creative expression and protest. The report reflects extensive research,

including a database of specific cases of repression and in-depth interviews with 21 creative artists that document their experiences and perspectives.

The coup’s immediate impact on the creative sector was devastating, with most galleries, art schools, associations, independent television channels, and other creative institutions closed down or forced underground. Yet, creative expression flooded the streets and digital space, often led by members of “Gen Z” who grew up during the political opening and who had no desire to return to the dark era that their parents so loathed and defied. Social media platforms abounded with illustrations, poetry, and music. Silent protests, satirical street theater, temporary public sculptures, and evocative graffiti filled public spaces.

Creative artists have used their work and influence to further the movement to resist military dictatorship, creating and disseminating art both on and offline. Meanwhile, creative expression unrelated to the coup has largely disappeared from the public discourse, as many creative artists have switched their attention to the movement at the expense of less publicly palatable non-political themes. Even so, artists also represent rapidly evolving social norms and advocacy for broader change through their work, in some cases pressing for a more tolerant Myanmar.

Vibrant creation has faced violent oppression, with

targeted detentions and extrajudicial killings, alongside the military's broader arbitrary crackdowns. PEN America has identified at least 45 creative artists who have been detained since the coup started, with many more being hunted and targeted for arrest, or forced to flee into hiding or exile. At least five have been brutally killed and many more have been subjected to abuse and torture. The third wave of COVID-19, exacerbated by the military's mismanagement and attacks on healthcare workers, has further devastated the creative sector, with the loss of many artists, writers, musicians, and actors.

The military has attempted to prevent online communication and organization: repeatedly shutting or slowing down internet access, blocking websites, and trying to force telecommunications companies to ramp up surveillance—all of which have affected the ability of creative artists to access information, share their work, and speak and create freely.

Many creative artists have taken substantial measures to protect themselves and those around them, including, for some, relocation, and others, anonymity, ensuring that they can keep working while reducing the likelihood that their works will be traced back to them.

Some creative artists are struggling with mental health issues caused by the coup. Guilt that creative expression is never “enough” drives them onwards. Battling widespread insecurity and the constant fear of raids, they describe experiencing anxiety, depression, and, in some cases, post-traumatic stress.

Despite censorship, violence, and mental health struggles, creative artists interviewed for this re-

port say they are resolute and committed to their evolving roles as both leaders and facilitators of the anti-military dictatorship movement. While many believe there is worse yet to come from the military, they also know that the vast majority of the public is behind them, and that their creative expression holds great social and political importance for the future of the country.

Based on the findings in *Stolen Freedoms*, PEN America puts forward a series of recommendations targeted at Myanmar's military to end its repression of the people of Myanmar, including the creative community. PEN America also proposes recommendations for foreign governments and intergovernmental bodies, the international creative community, and donors to hold the military accountable for violations of creative expression, while simultaneously strengthening political, financial, and peer support for Myanmar's creative sector that is adaptable and responsive to the changing situation in the country.