

The Rebellion is built on Hope

(An Interview with Leisa — a female rebel from Burma)

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January 14, 2023

It has been nearly two years since the Myanmar military seized state power through a coup. Despite their brutal oppression and cohesion over the entire population through various methods, people continue to resist their rule in various ways, ranging from CDM to arm struggles. Especially in the country's central region and the rural area, where the military's Russian-made jets and helicopters are bombing and their land forces are razing the villages into the ground, the will of people who do not want to be governed by the military has forced the rural peasant militia to fight on indefinitely, much like the Phoenix may ever rise from the ashes.

However, the Myanmar Spring did not begin as an armed struggle in the early stages of the anti-coup. It began as a peaceful protest of factory workers and students, the Civil Disobedience Movement of government workers, and some urban youth movements like Block Boc style "Owning the Hood," which blocked the district and built barricades and autonomy, and the "Non-Cooperation Movement," which boycotted the military's enterprise and products, such as taxation or an electric bill.

These spontaneous actions are not driven by a single command body or systemic resistance; to be more specific, they are not led by the electoral winning party NLD (National League for Democracy), CRPH (Committee Representative of Parliament), or its supporters, or by a social justice warrior of a specific activist. When a need arises, the society steps in, and various classes with different ideological backgrounds come together and support each other for the common goal.

We have seen what statisticians might have called utopian in the first six months of the coup.

Technically, both coup militaries failed to establish their rule, and the electoral winner didn't have the chance to rule. Because of the CDM movement, the government's healthcare and education services have been suspended, and brave volunteers have stepped forwards to fill the gap the society requires while it lasts. While the police were busy confronting the demonstration, vigilant volunteers formed a security team and patrolled day and night in their ward and district. Mutual aid is a natural response to the needs of a society where there is no crime and solidarity is strong; from street vendors to small shopkeepers, their contributions to society range from individual to mass and meet its needs. But such a realistic utopia of no government is destroyed by the overuse of force by the military and police. The brutal crackdown, mass killings, and use of lethal weapons over unarmed protest have forced people to flee the city and fight back, and the revolution has dramatically changed into an arm struggle.

Today I had a chance to interview an old comrade who is currently active and involved in a local militia group, or LPD (Local People Defense). From this interview, we can reflect, rewind, and review the libertarian movement from one aspect through her personal view and experience of the revolution.

Obi-Y: How did you get involved in the armed resistance revolution?

Leisa: I started to be involved in the Urban Resistance movement with some UG groups. When it failed and we were forced to flee from the cities, some of my comrades went to EAO (Ethnic Armed Organizations) control areas to get basic combat training.

I was left alone in the city to continue supporting those doing CDM (Civil Disobedience Movement). There are 20 CDM government workers for whom I have been providing mutual aid support.

Every month, I provided each CDM officer with one sack of rice and 50,000 Kyats (about 25 USD). All the way, I had to sell all my properties, and only when I could not afford to do so did I start asking for donations from other people online. Since the revolution started, I have sold all my belongings, including my home and car, let alone my other personal items. And then, my comrades returned from training in the jungle. At first, we could not decide which resistance force to join, and finally, we decided to join an LPDF (Local People Defense) in the region, the SBDF, and we enlisted in their base of two camps. At that time, we did not have public trust and people's support either. We had to eat and survive only with what we could find in the jungle, such as bamboo shoots and fish paste. Even so, we try to produce highly explosive material, hand-made rifles, and bombs with limited skills and knowledge, which we learned from short course training. I have to take on the role of transportation and logistics for support only. Whether it is rainy or sunny, day or night, I smuggled the materials and weapons that were made in hidden places in the city by motorbike to our resistance camp. Not to mention, there were many incidents where I nearly got arrested. To be honest, I am scared to die, and by fighting and striving not to die, I became a strong woman.

People like us who don't have faith in eternal life are more afraid of death because once we die, it's over. As much as our resistance force needs tremendous support, it is highly effective and performs many operations with great resolution. And, of course, we can't do it by ourselves without the solidarity, support, and mutual aid of the

people. We also have a treasurer, whose alias name is Mr. Yar Zar. Through his connections abroad, we received much support from overseas migrant workers. On the other hand, we suffered a lot of casualties and hardship in the struggle. We started with twenty comrades who EAO trained, but now we only have three, while half are KIAs (killed in action), and the rest are wounded and do not fit for a fight anymore.

Despite our losses, victory is in our grasp everywhere we roll; we managed to operate and accomplish tonnes of missions within two years. We have data and statistics that we will reveal to the public after the revolution.

Obi-Y: Could you elaborate on how your resistance group within the SBDF branch transformed into the current Buffalo Soldier?

Leisa: In our SBDF branch's two camps, we only had thirty members, and we didn't have enough food and materials to produce arms. There is no electricity either. We had to run the generator to manufacture the arms, which cost 50,000 kyats (about 24 USD) per day in fuel. So, we discussed our survival and decided to boost our public relations role and reveal some missions to the public to attract funding. Regarding the arms and ammunition, we might get them from the NUG (National Unity Government) if we enter their COC (Chain of Command). After making that decision, we asked permission from Commander Than Ma Ni of the SBDF to form a new local defence group called "Dynamite," and permission was granted.

The fame of the new militia group has spread throughout the region, and we have gained support from the locals. We could even buy an assault rifle. New recruits are arriving day by day to join us, not only from the region but also from our neighbors. In this way, our group started to complete the features of a battalion with men's power. With the help of a former NLD (National League for Democracy) party member and youth coordinator from the village, we applied to become an official battalion recognised by NUG's MOD (Ministry of Defense). And he was appointed the commander of our battalion. As we know, the organisational structure of the battalion is a very top-down hierarchy. Personally, I didn't like it, but I was just in the minority, so I had to follow their decision according to majoritarian democracy. And then something happened that caused us to split up again: I and the other half of my comrades left the battalion to become buffalo soldiers.

We agreed to leave the belongings, arms, and ammunition we got from donation funding while we were in the Dynamite group for the battalion, and here we go again, starting from scratch. However, there is no longer a top-down authority structure in Buffalo Soldiers. Everyone is assigned their own role and responsibility. I am officially in charge of accounting and delegation to speak with the public and other groups.

Obi-Y: As a woman who is practically fighting in the arm revolution, have you encountered patriarchal stigma and gender discrimination?

Leisa: Definitely, I have faced many obstacles, from gender discrimination to religious influence. Mostly, monks saved us. They received shelter and food from the monasteries.

In one case, we, the women, were not allowed to go to the second floor of the monastery, which is the only place to get internet access. When the monks came, we had to show respect and put our palms together in front of our chests. We were mocked for having tattoos, wearing trousers, and putting on makeup by some village folks. However, for now, everything is settled, and we managed to build trust and mutual respect with the head monk to a point where we could equally have an argument. As I show my respect for their religion, they have to show their respect for my freedom and my values. In general speaking, there are some power monger monks in this Buddhist community; they believe they are morally superior to their devotees. Besides, they are arrogant and enjoy power over their believers. In this way, they associate with politicians, and religion and politics have always intertwined.

In the past, the rural villagers dared not even step into the shadows of the monks who called themselves Sangha, Buddha's sons, and put on the religious robe as a power uniform just to gain wealth and power. But now they are swearing at those monks who stand for injustice. They ignore them when it comes to donations. They begin to question Kan's consequences (Karama). I am quite satisfied to see those actions. Furthermore, I believe that only progressive monks are capable of critically examining the religious beliefs and values that have been passed down and influenced them from generation to generation, and only they are capable of demolishing the religious wall they have built. That's why I think we have made some improvements as we progress. People now have disbelief in the power that religion has built, and the religious stigmas are now disappearing.

Obi-Y: Do you also think there is some improvement in women's rights and feminism?

Leisa: I am not a female Nazi, so I don't have many one-sided opinions on that matter. I want to share one incident I had in my battalion days as an example. A girl took a video of a guy when he unknowingly exposed his butt while playing the marbles game, and she spread the video to the whole group just for fun. The guy got embarrassed, and he almost started the fight. I stood up for that guy and blamed those girls at that time. "Did you girls think that was a joke?" Everyone has face and dignity, whether girls or boys; you have to respect that. Now that the victim is a boy, you think you are not to blame. But if he were you, you would start pulling it out as sexual harassment and play the victim card, right? This is because you see the boy not as a human, but as a man should be, and you accept society's gender values. Young people are getting fooled by Facebook posts about being smart women! (Wokeness).

If you cannot see people as they are and distinguish them as men and women as a gender, which is not equality. We must treat people as we would like to be treated, regardless of gender. When one female cannot change herself and have mutual respect. She is not qualified to say gender equality after seeing us and then being neither solidarity nor equality and demanding lady-first for everything. In general, although rural people have started to accept that women can have tattoos and wear shorts and men and women can equally work, sex and sexuality are still taboo.

Obi-Y: As an anarchist, to what extent do you expect to achieve liberty and equality from this spring revolution as of now?

Leisa: In my own opinions and beliefs, I wish to achieve that point where no one can rule anyone and the government is no longer needed. In reality, however, we are fighting a representative democratic system against a military dictatorship. I already knew that, but the situation that I am in has forced me to fight, and I have no privilege option but to fight and survive, so I decided to fight in this revolution because of one sincere hope that together with the revolution, we will be able to extinguish the long forgotten oppressed rights, class struggle, religious extremism, and gender discrimination to some degree.

Obi-Y: Finally, do you have anything to add?

Leisa: To be honest, those who are actively fighting in the revolution are mostly from lower-class mass and rural peasant families. There is no shallow soul in sight. People in the middle who are progressive or liberally educated (the petty bourgeoisie) are less involved; we live in a society where some privileged claim rights by extending and knowing what freedom is only by price. I, myself, am fighting this for my own belief or self-interest that I might be able to change something a little; I do not expect much. Even my small contribution will spontaneously change in one day. And I will continue to fight day by day, each with new hope.

According to the statement of AAPP (**The Assistance Association for Political Prisoners**), 22,00 protesters and bystanders have died since the coup until now. The death toll in conflict zones, as well as the difficulties of documenting human rights violations in an increasingly closed country, make calculating an exact number of people killed difficult. In many villages and towns, the junta's attacks drove out tens of thousands of people. UNOCHA (**The United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs**) predicted that as of early September 2022, 974,000 people had been internally displaced since the coup. Between the coup and June 2022, over 40,000 people fled to neighbouring countries, and the Junta has called for re-election to ease the pressure of international legitimacy for their rule, but the people's resistance is built on hope.

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