

Bo Bo Nge: An Imprisoned Economic Reformer

By Zin Myo Kyaw

Summary

As a Deputy Governor of the Central Bank Myanmar (CBM), Bo Bo Nge played a vital role in Myanmar's economic reforms from 2015 until the 2021 coup. That period showed a significant transition in both government and economic policies. He was critical in implementing policies to modernize the country's financial system and stop corruption. His efforts and leadership were part of a broader agenda under a civilian-led government in developing the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP),¹ a comprehensive strategy to promote long-term economic growth.

Those reforms were disrupted by a coup and imposition of a military dictatorship in February 2021. After the coup, Myanmar's efforts toward peace, stability, and democracy were ruthlessly compromised. The military regime detained and prosecuted Bo Bo Nge and other reformers and eventually put them in jail.

This case study describes Bo Bo Nge's arrest and legal challenges, placing them in the context of ongoing struggles for justice and reform in Myanmar. It begins by investigating Bo Bo Nge's contributions to Myanmar's economic reforms and frames his plight within the context of the human rights violations that have occurred since the military coup and the effect the military's actions have had on the country's development.

Context

Myanmar's political landscape has significantly changed over the past two decades, marked by alternating periods of authoritarian rule and democratic reform. To clearly understand Bo Bo Nge's role in the democratic transition and reform, it is important to examine the broader context of Myanmar's political history.

U Thein Sein Government and Initial Reforms: 2011–2016

After decades of authoritarian rule, the country experienced a period of political opening under President U Thein Sein² in 2011. His government introduced a series of reforms to liberalize the economy, improve human rights, and transition the country toward a semi-democratic government model. The government initiated peace talks with ethnic armed groups, relaxed media censorship, and allowed political parties such as the National League for Democracy (NLD) to participate in elections. His efforts laid the

¹ The Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan ([MSDP](#)), launched in 2018, is a national framework aimed at guiding Myanmar's development efforts toward peace, prosperity, and democracy. It is structured around five goals: peace and stability, economic development, job creation, human resource development, and environmental sustainability.

² U Thein Sein is a former military officer and politician who served as the President of Myanmar from 2011 to 2016.

groundwork for further reforms, although the military maintained significant power under the 2008 Constitution.³

Civilian Government Under NLD: 2016–2021

In 2015, U Thein Sein allowed an election that was deemed free and fair (Win & Siriwto, 2021). Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD party secured a landslide victory that opened a new chapter of Myanmar's democratic journey. However, the NLD victory did not mean that Myanmar became a fully democratic country. The 2008 Constitution, drafted by the military junta and ratified in 2008, guaranteed the allocation of one-quarter of the seats in the lower and upper houses of Parliament to the Tatmadaw, Myanmar's military. In addition, the military continued to control three of the most powerful ministries: the Ministry of Home Affairs, the Ministry of Defense, and the Ministry of Border Affairs (Ghai, 2008). Reforms during that period aimed to tackle corruption, restructure fiscal policies, and strengthen Myanmar's integration into the global economy (Turnell, 2024). In 2018, MSDP was introduced, designed by Bo Bo Nge and his fellows and it became a vital component of their comprehensive plan for the country's movement toward capitalism and democracy.

The Military Coup and its Consequences: 2021–present

Although the NLD government won the reelection in 2020, General Min Aung Hlaing initiated a military coup on February 1, 2021, just as the newly elected Parliament was about to assemble. General Min Aung Hlaing cited a section of the 2008 Constitution, saying that in the event of a state of emergency, the Commander-in-Chief has the constitutional right to "take over and exercise State Sovereign Power." On the same day, the first Vice President (former general), Myint Swe, was installed as the country's acting president, and the country's power was transferred to the Commander-in-Chief, Min Aung Hlaing, who was then, supposedly, tasked to investigate voting irregularities. The military claimed they would hold a "free and fair" election as soon as the election commission had been reconstituted and the voter lists had been investigated (CNN, 2021).

Protesting Junta

In the days following the military takeover, widespread protests ensued across the country as people stood together to fight the junta. People started protesting using various peaceful methods, including public demonstrations in towns and villages, chanting solidarity songs, and making noise with pots and pans at night for thirty minutes at a set time to express their disapproval of the coup. Creative forms of protest, using costumes and art, showcased the public's refusal to recognize the military regime as the legitimate government. Social media played a crucial role in gaining international support, with

³ The 2008 Constitution of Myanmar, drafted by the military, established a semi-civilian government but ensured the military retained significant power, including 25% of parliamentary seats. It also limits democratic reforms, with provisions barring certain leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi from the presidency

campaigns like the Milk Tea Alliance⁴ from Thailand, Hong Kong, and Taiwan actively engaging in solidarity with the Myanmar citizen resistance (VOA, 2021).

The Civil Disobedience Movement⁵

Peaceful protests became even more serious once civil servants refused to work under the military-run government. Throughout the country, the entire civil service population was galvanized to participate in what became known as a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM). It was initiated by doctors and healthcare workers who refused to work under military control as the junta killed peaceful protesters across the country. Other civil servants and professionals, including teachers, engineers, railway employees, police, and even some soldiers joined the movement. Consequently, social systems such as healthcare, education, and public transportation were severely disrupted (VOA, 2021).

Military Crackdown

According to Amnesty International, the military junta launched a systematic crackdown and used increasingly lethal tactics, including sniper rifles and light machine guns, against thousands of peaceful protesters (Amnesty International, 2021). Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP) also reported that 5,816 individuals died due to the violent suppression between February 2021 and October 2024; 25,541 protesters were arrested and 169 were given the death penalty. Out of 5,816 deaths, 644 were children and 1,221 were women (AAPP, 2024). Protesters were often shot in the head. At night, the security forces went door to door in nighttime raids, pulling people from their homes, especially young people and family members of the activists. Many of the detained were kept from contacting their family and friends (AAPP, 2024).

Arrests and Legal Repression

The junta focused on arresting CDM participants, especially in healthcare and education (Physicians for Human Rights, 2022). Their employers could be arrested if they provided employment. To legitimize their crackdown, the military amended Section 505(a) of the Myanmar Penal Code aimed at activists (Centre for Law & Democracy, 2021). The original version of Section 505(a) was to criminalize statements that might cause fear, alarm, or incitement against the state or public tranquility. However, the amended version included provisions that made it illegal to publish or circulate any statement, rumor, or report that could cause military personnel to refuse to carry out their duties. These violations now carry a potential sentence of up to three years in prison (ReliefWeb, 2021).

⁴ The Milk Tea Alliance is a pro-democracy, transnational solidarity movement that emerged in 2020, uniting activists from Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and later Myanmar. Named after the popular tea drinks in these regions, it symbolizes resistance to authoritarianism and promotes human rights, democratic reforms, and freedom of expression.

⁵ The Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) in Myanmar emerged after the February 1, 2021, military coup, led initially by healthcare workers and later spreading across various sectors. Participants refused to work under military rule, aiming to disrupt government operations.

Formation of the National Unity Government

Amidst the turmoil, several elected members of parliament formed the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) to provide legal legitimacy for the anti-junta movement. They declared themselves the legitimate representatives of the Myanmar people, abolished the 2008 Constitution, and produced a federal Democracy Charter (Progress Voice Myanmar, 2021). Subsequently, on April 16, 2021, CRPH established the National Unity Government (NUG) as the interim government, comprised of members of the NLD, ethnic political parties, civil society organizations, and ethnic armed groups.

The Emergence of People's Defense Forces (PDF)

As the military junta increased its crackdown on peaceful protesters, it became clear that non-violent resistance alone would not challenge the regime. The NUG announced the creation of the People's Defense Forces (PDF) on May 5, 2021. The PDF was established as an armed wing of the NUG to defend civilians and threaten the junta, and it started the way for the formation of a federal army that could unite various ethnic armed groups across the country. The formation of PDF became a significant shift in Myanmar's resistance (Hein, 2022). The PDF quickly gained support from the civilians, particularly young people who were disillusioned by the ineffective protests and saw no alternative but to take up arms. Many CDM activists, including teachers, students, and healthcare workers, fled from urban areas to ethnic-controlled regions to join the armed resistance. The absence of skilled workers basically stopped society from functioning in many places.

International Response

Internationally, Western nations, including the United States and European Union countries, condemned the coup, imposing targeted sanctions on military leaders and their enterprises while suspending assistance perceived as aiding the military. The response from Association of Southeastern Nations (ASEAN) was divided due to its non-interference principle, leading to the adoption of a five-point consensus that called for an end to violence and dialogue between the military junta and anti-military institutions, such as NUG, the PDF, and ethnic armed organizations (EAOs). However, the military junta ignored the agreement. The U.N. General Assembly passed a resolution in June 2021 calling for an arms embargo against Myanmar and condemning the violence perpetrated by the military regime. One hundred ninety-nine countries supported it, with Belarus being the only one to vote against it. The remaining thirty six countries abstained, including Russia and China (Human Rights Watch, 2022).

The Case of Bo Bo Nge

Bo Bo Nge's involvement in Myanmar's government began in 2015 as an economic committee member within the NLD government. In 2016, he was appointed to the board of directors of the Central Bank of Myanmar (CBM), and in 2017, he became its Deputy Governor. He was nominated by the NLD administration because, according to Zaw Lin Htut, Chief Executive Officer of Myanmar Payment Union "he is younger than the other members of the board, he can help the industry develop well into the future with his great knowledge in technology and modern banking services" (The Irrawaddy, 2021). He and his fellow reformers once proposed moving the Financial Intelligence Unit (FIU) from the Ministry of Home

Affairs to the Ministry of Planning and Finance to stop frequent laundering of drug money but General Min Aung Hlaing blocked the proposal (Turnell, 2024). In particular, Bo Bo Nge developed the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan, which would integrate Myanmar into the global economy gradually and carefully. However, these efforts inevitably faced friction with the military, as his work directly threatened its power and influence.

As Dr. Sean Turnell, an Australian economist and a former economic policy advisor to State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi, explains in *Best Laid Plan: The Inside Story of Reform in Aung San Suu Kyi's Myanmar*, "Central bank independence—granting it autonomy to achieve price and currency stability—was just too volatile to muck around with half measures" (Turnell, 2024, p.13). However, despite their aspirations for a genuinely independent CBM, Turnell explains that the institution was not, at the start of the NLD administration, fit for independence. "It was poorly staffed, badly led, and under-resourced, with a great deal of limitations before it could operate independently of the military's influence" (Turnell, 2024, p. 14). However, the reform itself was viewed with hostility by the military: the military had long benefitted from the CBM's weakness, the managing banking systems themselves. Bo Bo Nge and his fellow reformers tried to empower the centralized banking system, and this put him at odds with the military (Turnell, 2024).

Who is Bo Bo Nge?

Early Life and Education

Bo Bo Nge was born in Yangon and raised by civil servant parents. He studied geology at the University of Yangon but paused his higher education journey in his senior year due to the 8888 uprising⁶. He financed his education by selling second-hand books on the streets, where he gained firsthand knowledge of market dynamics such as pricing, demand, and supply. His encounter with municipal regulations taught him how to navigate obstacles, shaping his understanding of economics beyond the classroom (Myanmar Economic Bulletin, 2018).

Political Imprisonment

At the age of 20, Bo Bo Nge was detained by the military regime for participating in the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, also known as the 8888 Uprising, while he was attending University of Yangon. He was arrested and sentenced to four and a half years in Insein Prison (Gilder, 2021). Insein Prison is a notorious detention center located in Yangon, infamous for harsh conditions, overcrowding, and mistreatment of political prisoners. It became a dreadful place during the 1988 pro-democracy uprising, where thousands of protesters, activists, and students were detained and tortured under the military regime (Zawacki, 2008).

⁶ The 8888 Uprising occurred due to widespread discontent with Myanmar's military regime, which had ruled since a coup in 1962, leading to economic mismanagement, political repression, and social injustice. A series of events, including the failure of the government to address economic crises and rising inflation, sparked protests led by students and other activists. The movement sought to demand democracy, human rights, and an end to military rule, reflecting the people's desire for political and social change.

Prison Experience

As a political prisoner under Ne Win's authoritarian rule,⁷ Bo Bo Nge endured harsh conditions for more than four years of imprisonment (1989–1993) (Gilder, 2021). In an interview with Dr. Turnell for the Myanmar Economic Bulletin (2018), he described how prison authorities banned writing materials, books, and newspapers, with violations often leading to beatings or solitary confinement. Despite this, he and his fellow prisoners, driven by a hunger for knowledge, developed a system to smuggle in books page by page. It would take years to piece together an entire book, and they rarely finished reading one due to frequent cell transfers. He improved his English by studying classical literature, including works by Milton and Shakespeare (Myanmar Economic Bulletin, 2018)

Post-Prison Life

At age 25, in 1993, Bo Bo Nge was released from prison. He relocated to Inle Lake in Shan State. There, he identified an opportunity to export taro stems to Korea. He was inspired by his experience as a customs clearing agent and conversations with Koreans and other businesspeople, who highlighted Myanmar's potential in exporting agricultural products such as beans and pulses. He and his friends began an export business in 1994, which continued until 1999. However, he had to pause his business operation amidst Than Shwe's military rule (1992-2011) (Myanmar Economic Bulletin, 2018).

Migration to the United States

In 2000, one of the fellow prisoners connected with Bo Bo Nge was U Ba Win⁸, who was already in the United States working for Bard College at Simon's Rock in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. U Ba Win was able to help Bo Bo Nge to continue his studies. His migration to the United States and adaptation to US academics were challenging. He arrived in the United States with only USD 160 in his pocket. U Ba Win helped him move to Great Barrington, where he attended Berkshire Community College (BCC) for two years while working as a dishwasher to support himself. In an interview, U Ba Win mentioned that Bo Bo Nge was always at the top of the class (Win, 2024). In 2011, Bo Bo Nge was awarded a scholarship to continue his studies at Bard College's main campus in the Hudson Valley, New York, where he studied Economics. During his time in the U.S., he also acquired a Chartered Financial Analyst (CFA) certification, from which he gained insights into finance and investing. He graduated from Bard in 2004. Later, he attended the School of Advanced International Studies at Johns Hopkins University, specializing in international economics, focused on Southeast Asia (Myanmar Economic Bulletin, 2018).

Reform Efforts of Bo Bo Nge

Return to Myanmar

⁷ Ne Win's authoritarian rule in Myanmar, spanning from 1962 to 1988, was marked by a military dictatorship after he seized power through a coup. His government implemented a policy of "Burmese Way to Socialism," which isolated the country economically and politically, nationalized industries, and repressed political dissent.

⁸ A provost of Bard College at Simon's Rock

In 2014, Bo Bo Nge returned to Myanmar, driven by a desire to contribute to the country's economic development. He expressed his wish to rebuild his life with his wife in Myanmar and to gain a deep understanding of the nation's economic system. Upon his return, he joined KBZ Bank, Myanmar's largest private bank, where he initially led its research department as a Head of Risk Management and later oversaw several other departments. Bo Bo Nge noted that Myanmar's financial system, with its unique characteristics, required adaptability and openness to navigate. At the same time, he served as an economic committee member under the NLD in 2015. Bo Bo Nge left KBZ bank when he was appointed to the board of directors of the Central Bank of Myanmar in 2016 and became its Deputy Governor in 2017. While serving as Deputy Governor, he completed his PhD at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, in 2019.

Advocacy for Financial Reform

Bo Bo Nge was known for his aggressive stance on financial reform; he often criticized private banks, often complicit in crony capitalism, referring to them as little more than "pawnbrokers" focused solely on collateral and interest collection. He also looked critically at capitalist bank owners who benefited from involvement in other businesses, including airlines, hotels, and tourism, with the collaboration of the military government. He implemented key reforms, mandating private banks to narrow the gap between deposit and loan interest rates, to encourage economic growth. He also restricted regulations on non-performing loans and allowed foreign banks to establish branches in Myanmar. He also instituted policies that restricted loans to bank subsidiaries and prohibited appointing managers without proper banking experience, including the children of bank owners. This led to a clash point between him and the powerful cronies. However, those changes led to increased lending to independent businesses and improved mortgage access for middle-income families. Moreover, his initiatives included the rise of digital payments and online banking in Myanmar. Improving banking practices allowed citizens to open businesses and helped to build the middle class (Irrawaddy, 2022).

Achievements in Economic Transformation

Bo Bo Nge played a crucial role in Myanmar's economic transformation after the 2015 election, which marked the beginning of the country's reform process. According to data from American Institute for Economic Research (AIER), Bo Bo Nge played an essential role in changing the country's economy. For example, he played a major role managing Myanmar's economic reform, which gradually reduced the government deficit by fifty percent; he built a mobile payment system; and he initiated a special economic zone in Thilawa. Within five years of his involvement and other fellow's dedication, the Myanmar GDP rose from USD 1.8 billion to USD 10.5 billion. Moreover, in the banking sector, he initiated collaboration between foreign banks. As a result, over 17 foreign banks were allowed licensure under the NLD administration, leading to a 33 percent surge of USD 5.5 billion in foreign direct investment (Gilder, American Institute for Economic Research, 2021).

Contributions to the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan 2030

Bo Bo Nge and his fellow reformers, including Winston Set Aung and Min Ye Paing Hein, were dedicated and involved in achieving the Myanmar Sustainable Development Plan (MSDP) goals. One of the most

notable moves they made was to remove Myanmar from the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) “gray list” due to the country’s significant narcotics trade. Bo Bo Nge and his fellow reformers strengthened anti-money laundering and counter-terrorism financing regulations. They also improved financial transparency, modernized reporting systems, and enforced stricter compliance in the banking sector. Bo Bo Nge also sought international collaboration for capacity building and engaged stakeholders across public and private sectors to ensure unified efforts in meeting FATF standards (Turnell, 2024).

Additionally, the reformers emphasized the need for “fit and proper” individuals to run banks, aligning with Basel framework standards. In 2019, the Central Bank issued guidelines on the qualifications required for bank ownership, which some banks initially resisted. However, as foreign investment interest grew, banks recognized the need to comply with new domestic regulations to attract international investors (Turnell, 2024).

Arrest and Charges

On the first of February 2021, the military junta took power over the elected government and detained critical figures of that administration, including Bo Bo Nge, without legitimate reason. Bo Bo Nge’s wife described several police officers and military officials arriving at his house in Nay Pyi Taw, the capital city of Myanmar, and taking him away. For many months, his whereabouts and condition were unknown. During that period, military officials arrested numerous individuals linked to political movements without warrants. If a target was not found at home, the police would take a family member in their place. (Myanmar Now News, 2021)

In an interview, Dr. Sean Turnell shared his experiences from arrest to eventual release. He recalled that upon being detained by the military officials, he was held in a cell in the Nay Pyi Taw prison. He said the prison housed ten cells that were filled by senior officials of the NLD government. Bo Bo Nge was one of them. While Dr. Turnell was transferred to Insein prison two months later, Bo Bo Nge and others remained in the detention center until Bo Bo Nge was sentenced to twenty years after his hearing and transferred to Mandalay prison.

According to *The Guardian* and satellite analysis, the Myanmar junta had secretly planned to construct and expand prisons across the country to detain thousands of pro-democracy protesters. Nay Pyi Taw prison is one of them, and it is in the middle of the dry zone. The military regime built additional structures around Nay Pyi Taw prison, now called the Nay Pyi Taw detention center. Dr. Turnell also described the physical conditions in the prisons, where the treatment of prisoners was often harsh, and the food provided was inadequate. He also noted the unbearable climate in Nay Pyi Taw, an area that used to be a mangrove swamp, which infested the prison with insects and rodents (RFA, 2024).

Based on the data from Human Rights Watch, the junta established what are known as “special courts,” or closed courts, to handle politically sensitive cases. These courts have jurisdiction over cases involving detainees arrested for participating in pro-democracy protests (Human Rights Watch, 2024). They are weaponized against regime opponents. Most hearings, including Bo Bo Nge’s case, were held behind closed doors without public access or transparency. The legal rights of the accused were heavily restricted, and Bo Bo Nge was denied proper legal representation.

According to Radio Free Asia, after almost two years of detention in Nay Pyi Taw detention center, the junta court sentenced Bo Bo Nge to twenty years for the "mismanagement of banks trading foreign currency." The Anti-Corruption Commission (AAC), controlled by the military junta, prosecuted Bo Bo Nge, claiming he caused substantial losses to the state (RFA, 2021).

The first charge was the failure to collect tax revenue and mismanagement of foreign currency related to the withdrawal of USD 1.42 million from Open Society Myanmar (OSM) by the Small and Medium Enterprise Development Bank (SMEDB) a week after the coup. The military claimed that withdrawal caused the loss of hundreds of millions of kyats in uncollected income tax revenue. Under an agreement between OSM and SMEDB to support lending to SMEs, USD 5 million was deposited in 2018. However, the SMEDB team failed to report this transaction to CBM, a violation of foreign exchange management regulations (RFA, 2021). It was stated that Bo Bo Nge violated this regulation when a bank to which he was not connected failed to report such a transaction to CBM. In fact, Bo Bo Nge was detained by the military a week prior to this transaction.

The second charge was the mismanagement of foreign reserves, involving the deposit of USD 350 million in foreign reserves in SMBC bank in Singapore in 2018, which allegedly caused a loss of 655 million kyats (USD 3.12 million) in potential interest because the funds were not deposited in Bank of China (Hong Kong), which offered a higher interest rate. The ACC allegedly claimed that Bo Bo Nge caused financial loss to the state. This would appear to be an odd criminal charge for someone in government at any time, and particularly for this alleged "failure" given the problematic track record of the Bank of China during that period (Economic Report, 2019). The decision to deposit in SMBC was based on risks surrounding US-China tensions over the Hong Kong National Security Law. U.S. sanctions and potential restrictions on Hong Kong banks raised concerns that CBM would have difficulty withdrawing funds in USD from Hong Kong if necessary. CBM's decided to avoid the risks; therefore, the ACC argued that Bo Bo Nge failed the country (RFA, 2021).

Imprisonment

Insein prison in Yangon and Obo prison in Mandalay are the most notorious prisons, with documented human rights abuses on political prisoners. Insein Prison was recognized as one of the most sinister legacies of British colonial rule, built in 1877 and Myanmar's largest prison (BBC, 2023). Obo prison, also known as Mandalay Central Prison, was opened in 1992, and many political activists and leaders who participated in the 8888 uprising were detained there (Myanmar Witness, 2023).

Dr. Turnell shared the harsh reality of daily meals in prison, describing the appalling food that prisoners endured. Meals were served out of a bucket, with the daily fare consisting of bean soup and boiled rice. The rice was of such poor quality that it often contained small stones, forcing the prisoners to eat cautiously to avoid breaking their teeth. Occasionally, there was some form of meat, though the authorities sold off the best parts on the black market. What remained for the prisoners was nothing more than bone, gristle, and oily residue.

Dr. Turnell also highlighted the severe health challenges faced by prisoners, exacerbated by poor living conditions and a lack of proper medical care. He shared that a range of factors negatively impacted the

health of detainees, including inadequate nutrition from the substandard food and the harsh climate, particularly during the hot and wet monsoon season. These conditions made it difficult for prisoners to maintain a healthy immune system, leaving them vulnerable to illness. Turnell himself contracted COVID-19 five times while in prison.

Although doctors occasionally visited the prison, they often had almost no medical supplies. Dr. Turnell recounted a conversation with one doctor who revealed that the healthcare budget per prisoner for an entire year was just 20 cents, underscoring the dire state of medical care in Myanmar's prison system. For Bo Bo Nge, who suffers from gastrointestinal disease and hypertension, the lack of adequate healthcare posed an even more significant threat. His condition required regular medical treatment, making it especially difficult for him to survive under such brutal conditions.

International Support

Michael Rizzo, Professor of Instruction at the University of Rochester and friend and fellow employee of Bo Bo Nge, published a compelling blog post titled *Free Our Friend Bo Bo Nge*, where he describes him as “a compassionate and dedicated reformer” unjustly detained due to his commitment to transparency and economic progress in Myanmar (Rizzo, 2021). Alongside Rizzo's personal testimony, *The Berkshire Eagle* reported on how Bo Bo Nge's friends and former colleagues in the US have mobilized to support him by sharing stories of his integrity and dedication to ethical governance. “We are calling on everyone to join in urging for his release, as this injustice affects not only him but also the hope for democracy in Myanmar,” one friend stated by expressing their commitment to raising awareness (The Berkshire Eagle, 2022).

Bard College underscored its dedication to supporting alumni like Bo Bo Nge by sharing *The Washington Post's* report on his detention with the entire Bard Community, rallying solidarity, and actively raising awareness about his unjust imprisonment. SOAS University of London, where Bo Bo Nge earned his PhD, also released a public statement advocating for his release through highlighting his vital contributions to Myanmar's economic reform and dedication to democratic principles. SOAS underscored his role as a scholar and civil servant who was unfairly targeted by the military regime.

Those grassroots appeals have been joined by calls from major human rights organizations and international bodies. The United Nations has consistently condemned the junta's actions, calling for the release of political prisoners in Myanmar. Meanwhile, U.S. Senator Mitch McConnell brought Bo Bo Nge's case to light on the Senate floor by describing him as “an American success story” and urging the international community to join calls for his freedom.

This coalition—spanning friends, academic institutions, human rights organizations, and global leaders—illustrates the broad international and personal support for Bo Bo Nge, underscoring his significant impact on Myanmar's democratic movement and economic reform efforts.

What is Happening in Myanmar now?

Political Climate

Myanmar remains deeply entrenched in civil conflict following the military coup. The junta's violent crackdown on anti-junta groups, such as PDF and EAOs, has resulted in continuous armed clashes throughout the countries, even in the big cities such as Mandalay, Pyin Oo Lwin, and Lashio. Over the past few years, various EAOs and PDFs have successfully taken control of critical territories and military positions in several states and regions, signaling that the junta's grasp on power is weakening in some areas. For example, the latest assault on the Burmese military, on October 27, 2023, was a turning point in Myanmar's ongoing resistance against the military junta. It was executed by the Three Brotherhood Alliance, which consists of three powerful ethnic armed groups—Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA), Arakan Army (A.A.), and Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA). The operation aimed to disrupt the military's control in several strategic areas, primarily focusing on the northern Shan State, on the border of China and Myanmar. In response, the military allowed airstrikes by jet fighters, encouraged the burning of villages, cities, and public infrastructure, and targeted civilians in ways that are potential war crimes (USIP, 2024).

Economic Conditions

The economy has been severely weakened under military rule, a stark contrast to the period of economic growth experienced during the NLD government (2015–2020). Before the coup in 2020, Myanmar's GDP was USD 78.93 billion, which presented a 14.89% increase from 2019. However, the country's 2023 GDP was USD 64.82 billion, and the growth rate was 0.9% in 2023/2024 (UNDP, 2024). Almost half of Myanmar's population of 54 million is living below the poverty line, with 49.7% of people living on less than 76 U.S. cents a day. The country effectively halved its poverty rate from 48.2% in 2005 to 24.8% in 2017 (UNDP, 2024). Yet, the poverty rate in Myanmar is now back up to 47.7% (UNDP, 2024).

One of the critical issues exacerbating Myanmar's economic instability is its blacklisting by the FATF for failing to meet international standards on combating money laundering and terrorist financing. Those violations decreased confidence in Myanmar's financial system, with the international banks cutting ties and sharply declining foreign investments (USIP). Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), a significant growth driver in the NLD era, is now limited mainly to sectors like oil, gas, and natural resources because of political instability. Additionally, Inflation remains a critical issue, profoundly affecting citizens' daily lives. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, inflation rose to over 22% due to disruptions in production, international sanctions, and the collapse of the Myanmar currency (Asian Development Bank, 2024).

Conclusion

Bo Bo Nge's contribution to Myanmar's economic growth during the civilian government administration (2015-2021) reflects his unwavering dedication to the nation's progress, particularly in the banking and financial sectors. His leadership in reforming private banking practices and enhancing transparency in the Central Bank of Myanmar strengthened the country's economy. The military coup of 2021 not only disrupted these reforms but also led to his unjust detention. His story is one important example of the potential for positive change in Myanmar's economic landscape and the tragic consequences of authoritarian rule.

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How To Use This Case Study:

Faculty who would like to discuss recent examples of lesser-known human rights violations could use this case as a starting point for critical discussion and engagement amongst students. Instructors should assign their students to read the case study and ask them to come prepared to discuss the case in class.

This case study provides information on how the human rights of legitimate country leaders, reformers, human rights activists, and citizens are being abused and neglected by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and various international organizations. It also highlights how the absence of judicial independence and constitutional safeguards can lead to systemic abuses of power, including the arbitrary detention and sentencing of reformers. Suggested student learning outcomes include:

- Ability to examine constitutional protections or lack thereof under authoritarian regimes.
- Ability to analyze the tension between executive power and the rule of law.
- Ability to evaluate the role of legal frameworks in safeguarding economic reforms.
- Ability to explore broader problems in human rights, such as the role of governance, international advocacy, and the limitations of human rights mechanisms in an oppressive system.
- Ability to investigate the challenges imprisoned reformers face, the role of international organizations in advocacy, and how economic policies interest human rights in conflict-affected countries.
- Ability to discuss the philosophical implications of authoritarian repression and how state actors dehumanize individuals through legal and institutional mechanisms.

Discussion Questions:

1. What role does judicial independence play in protecting reformers like U Bo Bo Nge? And how can the international community respond when constitutional law is subverted in authoritarian regimes?
2. How does U Bo Bo Nge's story reflect the concept of dehumanization in authoritarian contexts? In what ways do economic reforms challenge or support human rights under authoritarian regimes?
3. How can international human rights frameworks redefine the "human" in contexts of systemic repression?

This Open Education Resource was created by Zin Myo Kyaw, a graduate student at Bard College and former employee at Parami University.

The case study was created in partnership with Bard College through the Open Society University Network and supported [in part] by a grant from the Open Society Foundations.

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