

Following coup, Myanmar's Indigenous vow to protect forests 'until the end of the world' (commentary)

by Esther Wah on 27 September 2021

- *The Tanintharyi Region in southern Myanmar contains an expanse of rainforest, ocean, and mangroves where a range of wildlife – from tigers and elephants to tapirs – roam, and the Indigenous Karen people consider themselves stewards of this richness.*
- *In 2012, the Karen and the Myanmar military signed a ceasefire to end 70 years of war in their territory, allowing the Indigenous communities an opportunity to develop new institutions, campaigns, and programs to conserve their resources and forests from destruction by outside interests.*
- *That ended with the military coup of 2021: "Attacks by the military on Indigenous peoples and environmental defenders means that the forests are at risk – and for this reason we want to say to the world 'this coup doesn't just affect our country, but the future of the globe.'"*
- *This article is a commentary, it reflects the views of the author, not necessarily Mongabay.*

The Tanintharyi Region in southern Myanmar is a beautiful and rich expanse of rainforest, ocean, and mangroves where we still have wild tigers and elephants, and where the forest provides all that we need in life. It is my home land. Our Indigenous communities depend on the forest for food, water, medicine, and our forests depend on Indigenous communities, who manage, conserve and protect them with great care. The Myanmar military coup risks all our recent progress after 10 years of rebuilding our lives, following 70 years of civil war. Our people plan to fight to protect our lands and win back our lives. We want the rest of the world to understand why.

Our Territory and Our Struggle

Though it is a rich, green land, our territory and our communities have also been terrorized and traumatized by decades of armed conflict at the hands of the Myanmar military. In 1948, our Karen people began our fight for greater autonomy, for self-determination, and for our basic rights against fascist oppression by the Myanmar military. The resulting civil war saw villages burned, people were killed, raped and tortured, and over 80,000 were displaced into the forest and along the Thai-Myanmar border. Relentless oppression of our people and our Karen identity meant that we never had a chance to develop, to forge our own destiny, to manage and protect our territory.

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Malayan tapirs are one of many threatened mammal species present in Tanintharyi's forests. Image by seth m via Flickr/Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

In 2012, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) and the Myanmar military signed a ceasefire agreement, bringing to a halt 70 years of brutal civil war in our territory. During this time of relative peace, communities were able to re-establish their livelihoods, manage and protect their lands and forests, participate in political processes, and finally live and breathe without the fear of being shot, abducted, and tortured. We were able to mobilize our communities, develop new institutions, and create new ideas for a collective and peaceful future.

While the ceasefire stopped the bullets flying and the soldiers destroying our villages, we experienced a barrage of new challenges. Suddenly new laws, concessions, development projects, and national parks threatened to confiscate our lands – the lands that we had already been displaced from so many times before. 1.7 million acres of land (<https://eia-international.org/wp-content/uploads/Green-Desert-FINAL.pdf>) were handed to crony companies for oil palm concessions, 3.5 million acres (<https://news.mongabay.com/2020/05/campaigners-in-myanmars-tanintharyi-region-oppose-21m-top-down-conservation-project/>) were earmarked for the Ridge to Reef project, a large-scale conservation program funded by the GEF, and other parts of our region were taken for special economic zones, infrastructure development, and mining operations. For us, it felt like the rug was being pulled from under our feet, just when we could finally stand.

In response to these new challenges, Indigenous communities and civil society organizations started to create their own conservation areas – proving their ability to conserve their own resources and protect their lands and forests from those who wished to destroy them. Communities across the region mobilized, strengthened their customary tenure systems, and documented their boundaries and land use systems. We showed policy makers how we govern our territories, and sought to have our rights recognized, and respected. We built networks with Indigenous communities throughout the country, creating new spaces of inter-ethnic solidarity, and started to join international platforms with other Indigenous activists from across the globe. We campaigned against mega projects with great success – our campaigns halted mining operations (<https://coconuts.co/yangon/news/govt-suspends-operations-controversial-banchaung-coal-mine/>), suspended palm oil concessions (<https://ejatlas.org/print/mspp-oil-palm-plantation-tanintharyi-region-myanmar>) and cancelled conservation projects (<https://www.accountabilitycounsel.org/2020/05/karen-indigenous-groups-launch-their-conservation-vision-for-myanmars-tanintharyi-region-rejecting-the-harmful-ridge-to-reef-project/>). We knew that united, we could win.

Together with my community, we developed new visions for what our territory should look like, and how conservation and development should be carried out. We developed a grassroots alternative to the Ridge to Reef Project, a Landscape of Life (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Oz9PsKITcsA&ab_channel=AccountabilityCounsel) that proved that communities were best placed to protect and conserve our territory, and that a peaceful future would include harmony between our Karen people and their forests and biodiversity.

See related: *[Deforestation surge continues amid deepening uncertainty in Myanmar](https://news.mongabay.com/2021/06/deforestation-of-endangered-wildlife-habitat-continues-to-surge-in-southern-myanmar/)* (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/06/deforestation-of-endangered-wildlife-habitat-continues-to-surge-in-southern-myanmar/>).

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Forests embrace a river in the Tanintharyi region of Myanmar. Image courtesy of WWF-Myanmar.

Our futures are again uncertain

On February 1st 2021, however, the military staged a coup, arrested members of the elected NLD government, and brutally cracked down on resistance. According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma) site (<https://aappb.org/>), over 1,000 people have been killed and nearly 7,000 have been detained or arrested, and the military has started brutal campaigns in ethnic areas once more, dropping bombs on our forests (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/28/thousands-flee-after-myanmar-armys-air-strikes-reports>) and burning down our villages.

Under the military regime, we cannot protect our land, forest and biodiversity – those who attempt to defend their territories will be detained, tortured, or killed – and we cannot protect ourselves.

Environmental defenders have been targeted by the military for the work that they have done protecting their lands from theft and destruction by military companies and their cronies. Recently, Kyaw Min Htut (<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/09/environmental-activist-well-hated-by-myanmar-junta-is-latest-to-be-arrested/>), a forest defender from Sagaing region was arrested and beaten, along with his family, because of his leading role in organizing his community and protecting surrounding natural resources.

Further, in Tanintharyi Region the offices of many environmental civil society groups have been raided and many environmental defenders have had to flee, hiding from arrest or murder at the hands of the junta.

Defending forests and the environment in Myanmar in 2021 is a crime punishable by death.

Despite attacks by the military and decades of destructive development, we still have a lot of forest in our Indigenous territories in Myanmar. Without forests, we cannot survive, and without us, our forests cannot survive. We contribute a lot to climate change mitigation internationally, and our efforts to protect our forests are clear. Attacks by the military on Indigenous peoples and environmental defenders means that the forests are at risk – and for this reason we want to say to the world 'this coup doesn't just affect our country, but the future of the globe.'

See related: Environmental activist 'well-hated' by junta is latest to be arrested

(<https://news.mongabay.com/2021/09/environmental-activist-well-hated-by-myanmar-junta-is-latest-to-be-arrested>)



Recently cleared forest in Tanintharyi. Image courtesy of FFI-Myanmar

Since the coup, our divided nation has become united. We have united in revolution against the military who has stolen our futures from us. We stand together to change the path of history, and until the end of the world we will not give up our efforts. Over 400,000 (<https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/over-400000-myanmar-civil-servants-still-on-strike-against-military-regime.html>) workers have joined the civil disobedience movement – going on permanent strike, youth from across the country have joined the armed resistance, and ethnic armed groups are continuing the struggle to defend their territories – together we cannot and must not lose. *Our fight is for the future of our people, our nation, our forests, our world.*

While our struggle has disappeared from international headlines, we call upon international governments, global social movements, international Indigenous organizations and the international community to stand in solidarity with us and help us to raise our voice – the world depends upon it.

If we do not speak out, our futures will be lost, and our forests will be destroyed. Until the end of the world, we will not let it happen.

Esther Wah (real name redacted for safety) is an Indigenous Karen activist.

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