

Conversation with a lifelong anarchist from Burma, Bro-Y: This is just the beginning

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The conversation between Hein (Abu Bakr) and Bro-Y, an experienced anarchist who has organised various anarchist societies in Burma for two to three decades, is presented in the following article. This article will discuss the historical development of anarchist movements in Burma while discussing what we may learn from earlier generations to improve current organising strategies. Additionally, the discussion will focus on class struggle, social justice, and decolonization in relation to contemporary political circumstances and ongoing anarchist initiatives within the Burmese resistance forces.

Hein (Abu Bakr):

I'm aware that the anarchist movements in Burma started in the 2010s. Could you tell us what sort of communities we had and what sorts of activities were done?

Bro-Y:

I could recall from my own experience that funny and stupid things we did from my own individual view as anarchism is a wide and decentralised topic and resistance to authority occurs in all forms of daily life and in various ways, and as we have no proper record or historical documentation, activity occurs on a small scale. In our own case, we started as "For the People for the Hood" (later 44), a group of teenage hip-hop enthusiasts who were keen for social change. None of us claimed to be anarchist, I was delusional, I myself as a socialist or communist. We believed KRS-1 Quote "Hip means movement, Hop means eminent," and "Microphone is my weapon". And rap music is just an iceberg of nine elements; beneath the water's surface is what we called street knowledge." How do we educate ourselves for consciousness when the state institution can no longer provide it or when we do not have enough privilege to go to school?

Hein (Abu Bakr):

What were the main sources to learn about anarchism at that time? I remember going to an internet cafe just to use the internet for a while back in 2010 and 2012. In 2013, I remembered having limited internet connections shared between different households to cut costs. At the

moment, we don't have Burmese books about anarchism in bookstores. How do you guys learn about anarchism at such times?

Bro-Y:

In 2008, Cyclone Nargis devastated Myanmar, killing thousands and destroying homes. In the aftermath of the disaster, the country's economy and politics dramatically changed. In 2010, the reformist Thein Sein government of retired military members took power, and the country's doors are now open. The place where I lived was bordering the disaster impact zone in the Aye Yar Waddy region; it is also in the uptown region of Yangon and one of the main industrial zones. We have seen so many people migrate, mainly from the Aye Yar Waddy region, who lost their family, their house, and their farm and were hoping for a better life, and the government cannot handle very well the resettlement and social welfare of the victims.

On the other hand, as the government officially opens its door and invites foreign direct investment, so many factories and workshops are demanding a huge labour force.

But accommodation, transportation, education, and even healthcare services cannot be well provided by either the government or a foreign investor. And not only from the Irrawaddy region, but many people from other regions also migrated into the city for better hope and job opportunities. So, the town is full of squats and shacks, and that is how our neighbourhood and story begin. It was people from downtown who were discriminated against as low-life, uneducated, uncultured, and dangerous, just like anywhere else in the world in a ghetto. It just matters that a bridge crosses the river; foreign capital powers build the factories on our side and demand our labour; on the other side of downtown, they build luxury shopping malls, skyscraper hotels, and bars; and the upper and middle classes can enjoy the global capitalism culture of consumerism with the fruitful labour of people whom they discriminate against as uncultured.

So, like African Americans, we believed that only through hip-hop could we have our own culture and strengthen our community's consciousness.

We are just a bunch of teenage kids who come from different backgrounds and speak different native languages. Neither class, race, nor religion unites us. So, the question begins with how we define ourselves and how we can band together. The only thing we have in common is that we are all from the same neighbourhood and we all like hip-hop, so keep it simple: all brothers come together as a family and end up as BHF. We share all of our money and food; most of us still should be in school or university, but some drop out and start working in various labour jobs. Some have never been in school, but they have good skills at rap but trouble writing it down, and some are really good at break dancing, but there is no cultural space for practising or for living.

Another new thing that reached us was "civic education," which was brought to us by foreign NGOs with different programmes. I could say that was the start of the rise of activism and social justice in Myanmar, and that was the time of that golden era of hip-hop culture, which became global. And we hear about the "Occupy the Hood Movement" that came after Wall Street, which makes us more interested in autonomy and community; we learn that it is not just the graffiti tag on the wall of our street but also the people who lived in our street. We try to expand our small circle. Inspired by the Black Panther Mutual Aid Programme, we called it the 44 Mutual Aid Programme. Originally, it was the 44OB derivation of "For the Hood, For the People, Of the Hood, By the People," but due to several reasons and circumstances at that time, we wanted to make it shorter, so it ended up as 44 in people's tongues.

We have faced so many difficulties. One of the facts is that we do not have a stable budget size as we rely only on our own budget sourcing, and another is the Buddhist concept of charity

(Dana), which is widely spread and strongly believed by the mass grassroots class. And another fact is that in the hood, most of the residents are not permanent settlers; people wander and move around where they might think of better job opportunities, and sometimes, with the rental issue, they move to a cheaper one, or in the worst case, their shack is forced to be removed by the authority. Not all the people get the permanent job at the factory; most of them become daily wage labour and always move from place to place where the job is leading them, from mining to construction and road building to bridge building as the country's infrastructure is upgraded for the next mode of production, where mass labour is needed. It was identical to Fanon Frantz's LUMPENPROLETARIAT.

And another important thing is a social or community centre. In most cases, squat places cannot be sustained for several reasons. The land law of the former socialist regime's 1974 constitution is still effective in some cases, like all property on land and beneath it belongs to the state, and there is no private property. But during the Junta crony capitalism era, the legal status is a 60-year rental contract that is regarded as a property buying and selling contract. In most cases, squatters also resell their land to investors, both foreign and local adventure capitalists, and these adventure capitalists somehow get permission from military bureaucrats as grantee land for use. The legal process is not transparent, complex, or free of corruption, as the Myanmar military is notorious for land grabbing by means of their own laws or by force. And also, the term and legalisation of public or community land are still unclear, as all belong to the state in a socialist regime, and the state becomes military in a junta definition. The new town of the industrial zone lacks community and social services. No library, no park; the only available community space is Dhama Yone (a Buddhist informal communal space for communal worship), the monastery, or the quarter administration office. So basically, these spaces belong to religious and state institutions, and these spaces only run state programmes or religious activities for the community. It is very difficult to organise any programme without their cooperation.

Another thing is that yes, Internet, numerous internet cafes are open, and I still remember having to visit internet cafés several times in order to download "Dead Prez's Let's Get Free" mixtape. And as the term "citizen journalist" spread, I was also getting some training about how to use Twitter, Facebook, or BlogSpot, which is how we start learning about the world despite poor and weak internet connections.

And of course, Hip Hop is all about education and cultivation. Street knowledge means that there is no textbook, no teacher, and each individual shares their own experiences; it is decentralised, deinstitutionalized, cultivates by living, learns by sharing, is pragmatic, based on material, and is anarchic. First, I do not know much about anarchism either. When I first heard about Ervin (Lorenzo Kom'boa Ervin), we thought he was a cool guy who shot the KK leader and hijacked a plane to fly over Cuba. It was kind of like a real-life GTA San Andreas thing. And you don't need to radicalise by reading some book; hostility to police and politicians is a universal thing in every ghetto around the world. Ice-Cube's "Why We Thug" explains class and the system of design in just 3 minutes. Sampling the quote or speech in the intro of rap music is a significant style. Sometimes we do not know who said that or from which book, but we know what it is about, so book smart is not our thing, but street smart is what we are proud of, and there is no way to outsmart the book in those days. There were still some book rental shops at that time, but they rarely put political or philosophy books there; what we mostly read is martial art novels, like Kungfu or Ninja; most of the story is about the vigilance against wrongdoing by authority,

and the teashop where they screened these movies So, it's no surprise that Wu Tang Clan has become our favourite rap group since we first heard about it.

Hein (Abu Bakr):

I came from middle class. I'm not too familiar to the hood kind of environment that you mentioned, honestly. But since I'm also not from rich-class, I'm not so too foreign to the hood environment either. I used to hang out with street punks and muck around when I was young. Most of the Muslim kids from my neighbourhood, we're really into punk because of all these discrimination and alienation we received. We didn't become atheists, or nihilist or individualist, or anarchist. It's more of a fashion to show our anger. We couldn't absorb the philosophical side of it apparently. So, I'm aware of the ties between the counter-culture punk movement and anarchism. The band "Rebel Riot" is something I like in Burmese anarchist punk artists. But the link between anarchism and hip-hop is too foreign for me. Personally, I like Nu Metal bands that also rap and rock at the same time, such as Rage Against the Machine and Body Count. Rage Against the Machine has an anti-imperialist theme, and Body Count has an intersectional class struggle theme. I really like the lyrics such as "Racism is real but not it, they fuck whoever can't fight back" and "This shit is ugly to core. When it comes to poor, no lives matter" from a metal band called Body Count's "No Lives Matter" where a rapper Ice-T is vocal. There is another Rapcore band called "Fever 333" that I really like too after 2020s. But normal hip-hop's alignment with anarchism is not something I am aware of. Could you elaborate more on it?

Bro-Y :

Anarchism is relevant in hip-hop culture. Class struggle and anti-imperialism decolonized and localised, autonomous are major themes in hip-hop culture, along with anti-parliamentarism and a strong emphasis on intersectionality and the connections between different movements and grassroots friendly. If you are not my neighbour you don't feel me, by mean of neighbour mean material environment which influence our way of life which also reflect on our consciousness, so basically same hood means same class, same struggle in some degree, I can't feel about a rap that talk about how to have fun and chill at the club with drug, alcohol and sex I feel like alienated, but I could understand about how thug life mean who have to do dirty works for rich and politicians just for their survival while some people might question about their moral and class consciousness.

However, expecting music from the industry with the slogan "Hip Hop for Social Change" is like believing in the "War on Drugs," run by billionaires who profit from the drugs. There are quite a few independent spaces and channels in the cultural field apart from mainstream industry now. But those cultural spaces are facilitated or funded by foreign NGOs or cultural institutions. And those spaces cannot be feasible for the masses and grassroots for several reasons. One of the main factors is capitalism and the global cultural hegemony of the euro. Centralism is not just simply imperialism; in a material sense, in order to change the mode of production of a society, cultural assimilation is a necessary step, and language is the visible element of culture. Like the N word or Kalar (Indian descendants), which have a lot of impact on the consciousness of the oppressed and lead to mass confusion, language is the mode of thinking and the core institutionalisation of culture. That is why in Hip Hop's nine elements of culture, street language is very important, as are creativity and innovation, which are important not only for sound, flow, and rhyming but also for news words and their meaning, which is new knowledge. As a former British colony, English is used to say secondary language," while there are seven other native

languages recognised by the state. But for the mass, working-class English is still too foreign to them, as most of them didn't finish school. And from the beginning, traditional art is always for upper and middle-class groups who are fluent in English and who can have a bohemian way of life, from literature to music that includes street culture like hip-hop, metal, or punk, while the grassroots are still enjoying folk music. So, this inequality of material conditions or living standards creates huge cultural alienation. So, this is not just about your taste in music and mine, where you lived and which school you went can be reduced to simply material environments.

And another reason why this urban culture cannot thrive is that the urbanisation is still in progress, or the working class is still in the lumpen stage or philistine, while the middle and upper-middle classes are forced to be cultured by the progressive education of western imperialism from the private sectors or NGOs with different kinds of skins like scholarships or grants. So, if we really want to listen to real consciousness hip-hop for social change, it should come from the ghetto. In order for that to happen, we need cultural space, channels, and material access for those people, who should organise themselves independently.

Hein (Abu Bakr):

I think I know what you mean. Let's take Floke Rose as an example. He is popular for his progressive lyrics, which are inherently atheist and individualist. I noticed he even has an anarchist logo tattoo on his leg somewhere. Also, he is somehow affiliated with Youth for a New Society, the youth wing of the Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS), a reformist social democratic party. I observe that many self-described anarchists in Burma are unaware of the distinctions between anarchism and reformist social democracy. They appear to believe that if they don't like authoritarian statist doctrines like Stalinism, Maoism, or Trotskyism, they will immediately become anarchists, ignoring the tendencies of reformist social democracy. Ironically, Floke Rose who has a tattoo of the anarchist symbol and has previously been associated with progressive organisations like Youth for a New Society and the General Strike Committee, is now working to serve the political propaganda of the military dictatorship.

Bro-Y:

We could say fake wakefulness" or false consciousness when it is localised by the neoliberal agenda. Class is always hindering for those who are over basic material needs and want to be fulfilled by ideals like the ideal of liberty and the ideal of equality in all aspects of gender and race, but in a realistic world, the idea itself is not enough to overcome the material power. We have seen a lot of famous rappers flexing about their "bling bling" and fancy cars, whether they know consciously or unconsciously that being poor means being oppressed. In the sense of digestible or indigestible, these expensive luxuries show the power of material; it could be a sign of victory in their struggle, or it could be their psychological insecurity of a commodity fetish.

At the peak of consumerism, branding is a very powerful mechanism; people no longer commodify material needs but certain ideal brands, and from the Che Guevara T-shirt, or a symbol of anarchy, to the Nazi T-shirt, consumer customization of alternating streams and subcultural content is sustaining capitalism, and new markets are expanding day by day. With the impact of social media like idolising and social influence mechanisms, the celebrity has to act according to what their followers want on social media or what their followers think is cool.

It is like the same scenario in politicians and their voters; in the celebrity case, they need lifelong support from their fans, so they need to act what their fans want, but that doesn't mean they believe in the same cause as their fans; they just simply fulfil their own self-interest as long

as it conflicts with their class interests. Meanwhile, politicians need only a period of campaigning before voting. The celebrities are the bohemian bourgeois class, and nowadays it's not only pop stars or models; activists, scholars, or any kind of social influencer take on the role of alternating current in social media too. But the real struggle is outside of the virtual world, in the hood and on the street, not in the private library or university campus on stage.

For the working class, its consciousness comes from the stomach, and their struggle is daily and survival-based; it is not the ideal of a better utopian world. From their own instinct, they know when to fight and when to stop. No matter which politician they vote for, they know they have to go to work to feed their family tomorrow. There is a saying in the Burmese proverb "No matter which king sits on the throne; you have to work on your own in order to feed your mouth". Some intellectuals may treat this as an ill-political culture and advocate for voting education underscoring representative democracy, but in my sense, it is an organic anarchistic belief that comes from lifelong experience. They completely understand the survival of the fittest in the price of blood and sweat without knowing Charles Darwin, which is why they also learn to stick together when the storm is coming while never hearing about the word solidarity or mutual aid. We have seen a lot of rappers claim how hard their struggle is from bottom to top of the pyramid, but it is just one in a thousand.

As the African saying goes, "If you want to travel fast, go alone; if you want to travel long, go with your companions", If we want to go as far as we can, patience is the key, as is endurance. As we have been like zoo animals and living in the comfort zone of state apparatus for like a thousand years, once we went back to nature and became self-sufficient and self-reliant, it may take time.

The problem lies with an educated mind; our education system brainwashes and institutionalises us to be dependent on the system and to compete with each other, while grassroots consciousness grows freely outside of the system with their own experience. So ideally, we could be anything we think we are: anarchist, feminist, or Marxist, but how we behave is who we are, and those behaviors are influenced by the material conditions of our environment.

Hein (Abu Bakr):

Speaking of working-class politics, what do you think of current liberal democracy movements? Some say there is no reason for anarchists to take part in a fight for liberal democracy. What do you think of such arguments?

Bro-Y:

Every rebellion is due to oppression; no matter what kind of ideological government oppresses; people will always resist. It is in the basic sense of human nature that the more intensive the oppression, the more energy will be bound up with the resistance. And this revolution doesn't occur under the strategic guidance of a great revolutionary figure or a particular manifesto; it is just a spontaneous movement of the people who wish to revolt against the military ruled.

Within one year, there is no certain centralised political entity to call the revolutionary frontier." People just do whatever they can to resist the military rule: strike, protest, boycott, no tax, no electric bill, CDM, and blockage the street and entire city with their own consciousness and organic solidarity. People who can't join the strike give money to provide food and drink for protesters, and people provide free rides to anyone who wants to go to the protest site or get home from it. The security of the neighbourhood is taken care of by voluntary and shifted shifts as day duty strike and night watch; everything is in harmony, voluntary, self-organised, decen-

tralised, and mutual aid. I have to refer to Kropotkin's quote: "Workers took the role of those who sacrificed blood and lives during the revolution, abolishing the old society, but while building the new one, their voice and role were always ignored."

It was the workers from that industry ghetto town who first marched towards the downtown across the bridge with their steel lunchbox, and then activists and politicians of different parties showed up and took credit. As a platform, different political parties, unions, and activists formed General Strike Committees. On the other hand, the election winner party formed a CRPH online and started acting as elected government while the people were on the street. In this sense, all stakeholder groups have only two things in common: the military coup and the revolution should be led by a frontier in centralisation. The problem comes with the second one: who should lead the revolutionary frontier? It seems there is power pulling between the election-winning party NLD and the GSC (General Strike Committee), which quickly organised in a short time with small parties, activists, and CSO groups. At that time, famous 88-Generation Student Activist Min Ko Naing said, "Every train has its locomotive." Even some anarchists believed that revolution should be centralised, and almost everyone disagreed with him. As a result of the failure of reconciliation to form alliances and cooperation among the anti-military coup side and the junta, brutal crackdowns led to the failure of the direct-action resistance movement in the urban area, but that forced the revolution into an arm struggle.

So, in my sense, it is not the people who have failed but the politicians who play over their own agenda and interests rather than the cause and brutal crackdown of the military regime. So many peaceful protesters, CDMers, and their supporters from different cities were forced to flee into the jungle and pick up arms. Only after that did NUG and NUCCI start calling for a federal charter. But in reality, the arm revolution is breaking out due to the mass peasants of the rurally populated areas, especially in the central region of Burma, most of whom are ill-political and initially try to defend their families with handmade firearms in the act of self-defence against the tyranny. This is a social call rather than a political one; they claimed themselves as righteous against the Adharma, but they did not make bold statements like for red or green. It could be their lifelong experience of suffering from poverty and oppression, an inhuman standard of living condition. And they also witnessed the brutal response of the regime, which forced them to arm themselves to protect their village and their people from mass murders, rape, razing, plunder, and many other crimes against humanity committed by the notorious Myanmar military. In the beginning, these UG units were small and scattered, independent and lacking in training, and had poor firearms. Some managed to form alliance coalitions between themselves, and they did rely only on people's support as a term of mutual aid. Later known as Local People's Defence (LPD), it was put under the chain of command of NUG's Defence Ministry. This matter is more about pragmatic survival than supporting the NUG's ruling class or fighting for representative democracy when their comrades fall to a well-equipped, well-trained army and their children die due to the bombardment of military jets, but I do not deny the fact that all the resistance fighters may have consciousness over the trust issue with the ruling class; some may openly submit to the ruling class just for their own indubitable self-interest. At the moment, "the restoration of democracy and abolishment of military tyranny" is the only revolutionary goal of the people with diverse and numerous ideologies and beliefs. Like in all history, grassroot peasant rebellion is always treated as a rebellion without cause; even if there is a cause, it is hard to hear by the world as poor in material means poor in firepower and public relations, which always lead to the failure of the revolution.

From the class stratification, there were over 22 million workers in local industrial workshops and factories and, daftly, about 10 million migrant workers overseas out of the 52 million population. So, the mass who drove the revolution force are the peasants of rural, centrally populated, fertilised land in the Aye Yar Waddy and Chindwin River delta regions. These are based on the records of permeant residency and skilled workers who register in industrial complexes, but there is still a lack of records of raw labour or daily wages in construction, lumbering, mining, and other industries that do not have permeant settlement.

As the state economy is heavily built on bumping ground markets, agriculture, and natural resources, we assume only less than 1% of the entire population has the wealth generated by these sectors, especially from lumbering, gas, and mining as main capital sources. During the reform period of 2010 to 2020, we could say that there was a significant increase in the pure middle on some scale, particularly in late 2015 when the NLD took power, as well as improvements in public education and healthcare, as well as public transportation and communication. Within 20 years, the price of a SIM card has reduced from about 1000 USD to 1 USD; materially, this could be said to be progress. And state universities like Yangon and other educational institutions have resumed foreign exchange programmes that had ceased over 20 years ago. But the reform didn't reach out to the grassroot class; the land and the capital, all means of production, are still in the hands of military plutocrats. The rise of the middle class and liberal ideology became dominant in the social and political lives of the new generation of activists, and vice versa, the new generation of military plutocrats had access to knowledge and networks to transform into cooperative capitalism as the country had been lifted of sanctions. So, the best we can hope for in this revolution is indeed liberal democracy, as our material condition already sets the solution.

But the working class will gradually progress day by day with their daily struggle, and we do not believe in anarchism as a holy order to baptise the working class; spontaneity and solidarity are just organic matters, and no one should have that kind of power. The anarchists who are fighting in battle are a more trivial matter; some answer the social call, some are forced to fight back, some lean back to the statist's social democratic tendency, and some are even partisans of Maoism. We believed in equality and liberty as components. From no liberty under military rule to some liberty under liberal democracy is also progress, but it doesn't stop there; spontaneous actions will come one by one as the time goes by.

Hein (Abu Bakr):

That's a great response. Speaking of rebellion, what do you think of the ethnic nationalism and the identity politics advocated by the reformist social democrats and the neoliberal kind of leftists?

Bro-Y :

Anarchism is very sceptical of all forms of authority and the ruling class; the military regime always portrays itself as Burmese-Buddhist and serves the national interest.

It is normal for anarchists to oppose Burmese-Buddhist chauvinism, but on a platform, anarchists are very few and weak compared to other Tankies and Neo-Liberal camps. That means other non-Burmese nationalists are also joining the camping against Burmese nationalism, and sometimes anarchists have to cooperate with Social Democrats and Tankies-lean students, so most of the radical anarchists become more individualists. In academic circles, gender and race always matter, class is always the missing piece of the puzzle in every issue, and ethnicity is always raised by race and religion rather than the structuralism of one culture. If I must comment,

most of our activists and academia from left to right have alienated themselves from their own society on ground and material levels; the ideal is the main goal of their motive.

For the ruling class, nationalism is the weapon to seize state power, and majority nationalism vs. minority nationalism, racism against racism, is an endless power game, aka identity politics.

The first institutionalisation of racism and ethnocrats was introduced by the British as their divided and ruled policy for their labour exploitation purposes, but not only numerous Burmese military generals but also other non-Burmese ethnic elites took that legacy too. And of course, anarchists prefer self-determination and self-rule, but that sovereignty will automatically dissolve once it is a general representation of a nation or a race, which is just ill-logic and indefinite.

But I hope one day after this post-revolution there will be more struggle from equality among all ethnicities to equality among all indigenes. **And this is just the beginning.**

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