



God weeps with us – Seeking justice for the people of Myanmar

October 2022

For faith, we said, is that trust in God then frees us sufficiently from self to make us cognizant of and compassionate in relation toward the other – in particular, the other who suffers, who is hungry and thirsty, who is imprisoned; the other who “fell among thieves”; the other who knocks at our door at midnight in need. The church is a community of suffering because it is a community whose eyes have been opened to the suffering that exists. The first assumption of this ecclesiology is not that the church should suffer but that it should be (in Simone Weil’s sense) “attentive” – namely, attentive to the suffering that is simply there and that is usually bypassed by the world, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

Douglas John Hall, ‘The Cross in Our Context’, 2003, pages 152-153.

On 1 February 2021, the army in Myanmar overthrew the democratically elected government and imposed a dictatorship. The military dictatorship has murdered at least 1,600 civilians, 100 of whom children, and detained 14,000 since it seized power. Last year, 21% of deaths by security forces had occurred while victims were in custody. In addition, many detainees have been tortured or abused.

They brought boiling water in a cup, put the cup to my mouth, and asked me to drink it. I could not hold the cup because I was handcuffed. They poured hot water on my knees and legs when I could not drink the boiling water. I was not given any food for two nights and one day.

Testimony from a woman detained by the regime as documented by Amnesty International in “15 Days felt like 15 Years. Torture in Detention since the Myanmar Coup”, August 2022, page 10.

A civil war has escalated since the military seized the government. The civil war has resulted in 1.3 million people needing to flee their homes. The military continues to carry out atrocities in the context of the civil war. For example, on Christmas Eve 2021 it carried out a massacre of at least 40 civilians near the village of Moso in Hpruso Township, Karenni State. Those murdered included children and two people working for the international NGO Save the Children.

Prices of vital commodities have surged, with an estimated 11 million people facing acute food insecurity. The World Food Program’s price monitoring in August 2022 estimated the cost of essential food was 54% higher than a year ago.

The military regime depends on revenue from the army’s extensive business interests and its ability to continue to purchase weapons from overseas. Sanctions are needed to undercut both these pillars that allow the military to maintain its grip on power.

In July 2022, the regime executed four political prisoners: Phyo Zeya Thaw, Kyaw Min Yu, Aung Thura Zaw and Hla Myo Aung. In September 2022, Human Rights Watch also reported they had documented the deaths of six detained activists from torture or denial of medical care. In addition, the Thailand-based Assistance Association for Political Prisoners estimated that at least 73 people have died in police or military custody since the coup.

On 29 September 2022, the military dictatorship sentenced former leader Aung San Suu Kyi, three of her former cabinet members and her Australian adviser, Professor Sean Turnell, to three years in prison under secrecy laws imposed by the former British colonial regime. They were convicted based on documents they had in their possession. The exact nature of the charges against them has not been made public by the junta. The trial was held in secret, with defence lawyers forbidden from talking about the trial.

Professor Turnell, an associate professor in economics from Macquarie University, had served as an adviser to Aung San Suu Kyi. His arrest occurred five days after the military seized power.



Minister for Foreign Affairs, Penny Wong, said the Australian Government rejected the court ruling in the case and called for Professor Turnell's "immediate release".

In the case of Aung San Suu Kyi, the extra three years of imprisonment will be added to the 20 years she is already serving.

In November 2021, the World Council of Churches stated, "The military coup in Myanmar has undone a decade of hard-won democratic and human rights gains." It called for:

The members of the international community to ensure accountability for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law committed by the military authorities of Myanmar and Sudan, to recognise the National Unity Government (NUG) as the legitimate democratically-elected representatives of the people of Myanmar, and to work for the swift return to civilian-led governments and a resumption of the democratic transition in both Myanmar and Sudan.

The Australian Government has suspended military cooperation with Myanmar.

While previously in Opposition, the Labor Party stated that the military dictatorship should release all political prisoners. It also noted that it supported, and had repeatedly called for, targeted sanctions against those responsible for the coup. The US, UK and Canada are among the governments that have already applied targeted sanctions.

Labor in Opposition also called for high-level Australian Government engagement with the National Unity Government (NUG). NUG is the civilian government of Myanmar in exile.

What You Can Do

Write polite and respectful letters to:

Senator the Hon Penny Wong
Minister for Foreign Affairs
PO Box 6100
Senate
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Salutation: Dear Minister



Points to make in your letter:

- Express deep concern at the imposition of the military dictatorship in Myanmar and the human rights abuses it continues to inflict on the people of Myanmar.
- Thank Minister Wong for speaking out against the conviction of Professor Sean Turnell.
- Ask that she continue to make every effort to secure the release of Professor Turnell and other political prisoners in Myanmar.
- Ask what action the Commonwealth Government has taken since being elected to expand sanctions against those responsible for the coup.
- Request to know what steps the Commonwealth Government has taken to engage with the National Unity Government.
- Ask that the Australian Government:
 - Recognise the National Unity Government as the legitimate representative of the people of Myanmar until genuine democratic elections can be held;
 - Support a comprehensive global arms embargo against the regime;
 - Work with other governments in the region and across the globe to seek the creation of genuine democracy in Myanmar; and
 - Support efforts to refer the military dictatorship to the International Criminal Court.