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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Ad Hoc Information Request looks at the role political activism plays in Yangon’s cultural scene, with a focus on artistic forms of expression. The report summarizes the use of art and performance in the political realm and how it has changed throughout Yangon’s post-colonial history. It discusses leading forms of artistic expression and artists’ messaging and influence in the country, as well as the challenges these artists face in Yangon.

In the last decade, a proliferation of new artistic forms, like the online meme culture and punk rock have emerged, protesting human rights abuses by the military (Tatmadaw), the Government, and religious groups such as the Ma Ba Tha. More traditional forms of artistic political activism, such as Thangyat and Anyeint performance art, continue to dominate Yangon’s cultural activist scene. While punk bands have attracted the attention of the international community, their scope of influence within Myanmar is limited to the punk music subculture.

Perceptions of the political counterculture are still mostly negative, and a lack of public spaces for art installations limits activists’ influence. In addition, the threat of arrest has led many in Yangon’s artistic community to practice self-censorship. Although the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led government was originally seen as supportive of politically active artists, recent signs, such as the elimination of political cartoons from state-run newspapers, indicate that these artists face similar threats to activism and expression as their counterparts in more traditional media and civil society.

Still, artists in Yangon are becoming more prominent, their influence boosted by the ease of sharing their art and message on social media. In Yangon, the tie between the cultural scene and political activism is strong, and artists will likely continue using their art to political ends, even if the Government forces many underground.
INTRODUCTION

Political and social activism have shaped Myanmar’s history and, particularly in Yangon, led to changes throughout the country. The ’88 Student Uprising and the Saffron Revolution protests began in Yangon. Religious and student organizations are largely considered the main instigators of political activism and protests, but there are performing artists, poets and musicians who are also politically active. The cultural scene and political activism are especially connected in Yangon, where they evolved naturally from traditional Thangyat performances criticizing the monarchy to live performances and the popular meme culture pervasive on social media today.

In this report, Yangon activism and cultural influences are explored through the music scene – punk rock, visual activism, written activism, and performance art. All four forms of artistic expression are part of a wider analysis of historical trends in culture and activism, with a focus on how popular and influential they are today, and the challenges artists face.

This report draws chiefly on primary data collected from artists, musicians, and experts on cultural influences and activism in Yangon, and from focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted with Yangon residents. Each FGD includes a variety of individuals, differing in age, gender, and occupation. News articles and scholarly essays were consulted to understand the history and put the current state of activism in Yangon into context.

CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN YANGON OVER TIME

Before 1962: During the colonial era, Myanmar’s artists enjoyed relatively high levels of freedom of expression, with poets like Dagon Taryar forming the “New Writing Movement,” also known as leftist poetry.\(^1\) To disseminate their message, activists used Thangyat – comedic poetry performed at the Thingyan (Burmese New Year Festival), and Anyeint – a form of traditional Burmese entertainment, comedic song and dance routines, literature, paintings, and poems. After the founding of the University in the 1920s, contemporary literature became a leading medium of activism in the capital.\(^2\)

1962-1988: Restrictions on freedom of expression under the military junta government meant that many artistic dissidents focused on the corrupt nature of the regime. Protests through Anyeint performances peaked in the 1970s when the Hundred Moon Troupe publicly spoke up on democratic issues, a significant risk to the troupe’s personal security at the time. The activists of the ’88 Student Uprising inspired protest songs such as “Kar-Bar-Ma-Kyay-Bue” (translation: “we will not be satisfied ‘till the end of the world”), as well as Thangyat group performances like “Goat Mouth and All-Seeing Eye,” and satirical cartoons.\(^3\)

1988-2011: Performance art and poetry emerged as common methods of activism after the ’88 Student Uprising. Phyu Mon, reportedly the first female performance artist, used balloons to describe the pressures of tyranny and censorship (see annex), and famous poems such as “February 14” by San Wai, inspired

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participation in the Saffron Revolution. The Government’s attempts to suppress these methods were unsuccessful because activists found ways to circulate their messages. For instance, Thangyat groups living in exile would send CDs across the border into Myanmar.

Thangyat groups, cartoonists, and performance artists were at the forefront of denouncing the Government’s actions during the Saffron Revolution. Many new counterculture activists were also born in the aftermath of the Saffron Revolution, like the punk rock band Rebel Riot and Generation Wave, a group of activists that includes ex-rappers who use graffiti and music to express artistic dissent.

2011-2015: When the Thein Sein Government abolished the Press Scrutiny Board, artists began to create politically themed works more openly. Photography and videography became common forms of expression, advanced by initiatives like the Human Rights Human Dignity Film Festival. Despite a telecommunications law that banned support for the NLD, musicians often attended NLD rallies and released songs about peace and human rights.

2015-Present: After the NLD came to power, political art and photography exhibitions, such as Seven Decade and Beyond the Prison Gate, which focused on political prisoners, proliferated in Yangon. During the 2015 campaign and immediately after the election, the NLD signaled support for free artistic expression with events such as the Myanmar Political Festival, which included an Anyeint competition. However, the NLD-led Government also arrested artists like the Peacock Generation Thangyat group and the poet Maung Saung Kha, demonstrating limits on its tolerance for artistic forms of political activism.

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1947 JUL
General Aung San is Assassinated
Leader of Myanmar's independence movement and "Father of the Nation", General Aung San, is assasinated.

1948 JAN
Independence Day

1962 LATE
Introduction of Pre-Publication Censorship Law
Introduction of the Printers and Publishers Registration Law which forces publishers and printers to submit copies of their manuscripts to the Press Scrutiny Board.

1988 AUG
'88 Student Uprising
Nationwide protests against the Burma Socialist Programme Party ends in a coup by SLORC. Aung San Suu Kyi emerges as leader for democratic reform. Thousands are thought to have died in the protests, and 8,000-10,000 protesters flee the country.

2007 AUG-OCT
Saffron Revolution
Economic and political protests are triggered over the government's removal of fuel subsidies. Buddhist monks hold a series of anti-government protests.

2008 MAY
2008 Constitutional Referendum
The Burmese military government hold a referendum on a draft constitution following Cyclone Nargis.

2008 NOV
Secret Trials of Political Prisoners
Activists who participated in the Saffron protests are convicted in secret trials. Some are sentenced to imprisonment up to 65 years.

2010 NOV
Aung San Suu Kyi Is Released
After spending 15 of 21 years under house arrest, Aung San Suu Kyi, along with a few other political prisoners, is released.

2012 AUG
Abolishment of Pre-Publication Censorship Law
The Government removes 2,012 people from its blacklist, and political activists like Moe Thee Zun, a known leader of '88 Student Uprising, returns to Myanmar.

2012 SEP
Leader of '88 Student Uprising Returns to Myanmar
The Government releases 2,012 people from its blacklist, and political activists like Moe Thee Zun, a known leader of '88 Student Uprising, returns to Myanmar.

2018
Free Speech Protests
The arrest of two Reuters journalists sparks free speech demonstrations.

Circle colors correspond to emergence period while outer circle sizes indicate cultural age and significance. Thick outline denotes an emergence of new cultural influences.
MAJOR ACTIVIST GROUPS

THE MUSIC SCENE
Music plays a significant role in activism in Yangon, both in popular culture and the underground subcultures. A member of Generation Wave interviewed for this report explained that music is used to bring public attention to pressing socioeconomic and political issues, and to encourage the public to join movements. Key informants and FGD participants named Phyu Phyu Kyaw Thein, Saw Phoe Khwar, Ni Ni Khin Zaw, Lynn Lynn, She, Tun Eaindra Bo, and Annaga as famous musicians and activists. Their lyrics often address the peace process and human rights, and some songs promoted the NLD during the campaign period for the 2015 general election.

Musicians who use underground channels – like practicing and performing in secret and in abandoned buildings – to spread their message include Side Effect, Rebel Riot, Culture Shock, A Letter from Caesar, Indie Band, Big Boy, and Floke Rose. These bands primarily focus on human rights issues. According to the Generation Wave band member, it is important to note that these musicians do not see themselves as political activists. Words like “politician” and “political activist” carry negative connotations, because politicians are often seen as opportunists. Consequently, these musicians refer to themselves as Anuhpyingya, or artists, not political activists.

Of the different types of musicians and groups, punk rock band members are the most prominent activists in Myanmar. Punk culture was reportedly first imported to Myanmar in the 1990s by a sailor who came across punk music CDs while traveling abroad. The subculture spread in Yangon. The band Rebel Riot caught the attention of the international community for its prominent and fearless stance on the Rohingya crisis, which it openly refers to as genocide. They also have a song with the title “Genocide.”

Rebel Riot, which is part of a larger punk community called Common Street, was founded in 2007, just after the Saffron Revolution, as a way to protest military brutality. A member of Generation Wave told Mekong researchers that the band focuses on human rights, especially on the use of religion to justify communal violence in Rakhine State and the ongoing conflict with the Arakan Army. However, a researcher close to the members of Rebel Riot said that the band does not see itself as political because it focuses on many important issues beyond politics, including basic human rights and the use of Buddhism to promote religious persecution and violence.

Despite restrictions on freedom of expression, it is relatively easy to understand the Rebel Riot’s bold messages as showcased in its three albums titled Puppet Society, F***k Religious Rule/Wars, and No Place to Live. “Genocide,” one of their latest songs that references the Rohingya crisis, includes the lyrics “blood thirsty military pigs” and “f***k religious rules.” Most surprisingly, despite the overt messages encapsulated in their songs, members of the band have never been threatened with arrest. One expert believes the reason is that they do not name the Tatmadaw (military) specifically in their songs. Furthermore, owing to the negative stereotypes surrounding the punk subculture, the Rebel Riot expert believes that the authorities do not take the group seriously, regarding the members as “drunkards” and “drug-abusers.”

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The band vehemently denies abusing either substance. The member of Generation Wave also explained that the underground and fringe nature of the group, as well as its use of abandoned buildings to perform, protects it from attracting the attention of authorities.

Religious institutions have raised concerns, however, especially after the release of the documentary My Buddha is Punk in 2015—about a young punk rocker who uses his music to raise awareness of social issues—and after Rebel Riot tried to promote religious co-existence by dressing up, posing and performing a song as Buddha, Shiva, and Jesus in 2017. This caught the attention of the nationalist Buddhist organization Ma Ba Tha, forcing the group to publicly apologize “for having upset those who misinterpreted the photo.”

In spite of the band’s international exposure, which peaked with a European tour in 2016, information gleaned from FGDs indicates that the general population does not necessarily know the band for its music or activism, but is somewhat aware of its charitable activities, including feeding and educating the homeless through their Food Not Bombs and Books Not Bombs initiatives. The band’s narrow influence in Myanmar could also be attributed to the limited popularity of punk rock, as local radio stations focus on more mainstream genres such as pop, ballads, and, sometimes, rock. The band is primarily known on the international and local punk scene, and by those interested in activism in Yangon.

Still, activists’ music became more widespread as social media sharing platforms grew in popular use. According to the FGD participants, Soundcloud, P-Cloud and Facebook are the most common platforms used to share music. But the FGD participants claim that Thangyat and Anyeint remain more influential than modern music. Many FGD respondents, especially older respondents, struggled to name activist bands, whereas they easily identified traditional Thangyat and Anyeint groups.

THE WRITTEN WORD
Professional writers, poets, and cartoonists helped shape the politics of post-colonial Myanmar. Before social media platforms were introduced, literature was one of the most important means of sharing knowledge and encapsulating political and social movements. Historically, the city of Mandalay was the cultural hub for literature in Myanmar, but most contemporary writers live in Yangon. Over the decades, the Government has persecuted many outspoken authors and poets. Many politically active writers, like Ludu Daw Amar, her husband Ludu U Hla, and journalist Win Tin died of old age in recent years. Still, the advent of social media has only increased the reach of the country’s literati.

Many of Myanmar’s well-known contemporary authors write for high circulation newspapers and journals, and post frequently on Facebook. Some of the more well-known contemporary writers include Sit Thu Aung Myint (Frontier); Myo Thein (Radio Free Asia and Eleven Media Group); Mon Mon Myat (Irrawaddy); Kyaw Win, Zeyar Thu, and Kyaw Min Swe (The Voice Journal); Aung Thu Nyein, Min Zin, Sumon Thazin Aung (Institute for Strategy and Policy - Myanmar); Dr. Ngun Cung Lian (Myanmar Institute for Peace and Security); and former Information Minister, Ye Htut.

Rhyme-less modern or contemporary poems derived from Khit San — a literary movement in 1930’s

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Myanmar – are popular in Yangon. These modern poems, introduced in the 1970s, are written from the perspective of ordinary people, usually against the Government. The poet Zeyar Lin said that these poems traditionally capture the stance of the people’s criticisms of the Government, using “I” as a representation of the people, but these poets no longer focus on political activism as they once did before the NLD came to power. FGD respondents noted that this form of poetry and poetry events – where writers, poets, celebrity activists, and former political prisoners criticized the government – were popular under the USDP government but are less so today.

Cartoons and illustrations, which frequently contain messages of criticism, are another popular manifestation of cultural influence in Myanmar. Unlike other forms of written activism, cartoons and illustrations have reportedly led to no arrests for defamation in recent years. However, a Yangon cartoonist said that while this type of political commentary was included in state newspapers in the early days of the NLD Government, it is no longer accepted, signaling that the Government has grown increasingly sensitive about it. Alternative media, including the Bullet Journal, a print journal affiliated with the Ma Ba Tha and the USDP, often use cartoons to criticize the Government. Today, cartoons are often shared on social media.

About 60 percent of Myanmar’s population uses social media, primarily Facebook. This way of sharing and getting news is steadily growing and with it opportunities for activism as citizens exchange opinions, photographs, and news stories. The widespread use of social media has also led to new forms of activism, including what is referred to as the meme culture. Yangon and national politicians, such as the Yangon Chief Minister Phyo Min Thein, former president Thein Sein, are often targets of memes. Sometimes General Than Shwe and Aung San Suu Kyi are targets, but these memes are shared discreetly.

Although memes are not considered as sensitive as other forms of activism, in 2015, a Facebook user in Yangon was arrested for sharing a meme criticizing the uniform of military members with a picture and the quote, “They like the color of Mother Suu’s sarong so much, they are wearing it.” Another Facebook user, the husband of a prominent Kachin and women’s rights activist, was arrested for sharing a meme depicting a man wearing a Kachin longyi (a longyi is a sheet of cloth widely worn in Myanmar), stepping on a picture of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing. The man contends that his account had been hacked. Since 2015, people, including poet Maung Saungkha, have been arrested under Telecommunications Act 66(D) for online social media posts. While the rapid adoption of social media has paved the way to a richer form of expression, it has also increased the Government’s ability to penalize its critics.

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13 Ibid.
15 Poppy McPhearson, March 22, 2015; Personal communication with a key informant for this report, July 2019.
16 A photograph of the print journal, Bullet Journal, can be found online here: https://www.facebook.com/search/top?q=%E1%80%94%E1%80%A9%E1%80%B9&epa=SEARCH_BOX; Wanna Aung, “Will sue if used cartoons without permission of the artist” (Burmes language), 7Day Daily Newspaper, July 7, 2019. http://54.255.198.232/story/160564;
20 Ibid.
VISUAL ARTS
Painters and street artists are particularly prominent in Yangon’s counterculture. Street art was officially banned in 2013 after the creation of a mural that welcomed US President Barack Obama in 2012. The mural received significant attention and some believe it was, in part, the reason for the ban. Nonetheless, legal art exhibitions as well as illicit street art continue to promote messages about unlawful land grabs, power shortages, and censorship. Street artists also caricature military generals and express support for Aung San Suu Kyi. Even when it is not about politics or social issues, street art is in itself a form of activism since it is heavily regulated by Yangon police forces and therefore “exists in a murky legal area.” In 2015, the French Institute, funded by the French Government, launched the Yangon Street Art Festival to promote street art, but its influence is limited. According to FGD respondents, Yangon citizens tend to look down on street art, considering graffiti to be a form of vandalism.

Photographers are more influential than many visual artists in Yangon, but still do not attract significant attention from the general public. A photographer involved in the exhibition *Beyond the Prison Gate*, shown in multiple locations around Yangon in 2018, noted that the event attracted members of the international community, diplomats, friends of the photographer, and families of political prisoners featured in the exhibition, but it failed to attract the capital’s general population.

Other recent photography exhibitions have also not attracted much attention in Yangon, especially when compared to one-off images that depict harrowing atrocities and are published along with news articles. The general lack of interest in exhibitions and galleries was underlined by a prominent contemporary artist, who pointed to the lack of art in public spaces as a contributing factor. The artist told Mekong researchers that if public spaces could be used to showcase art, the general public would become more attuned to photography and other art exhibitions.

Notably, photographers appear to have less fear of arrest. When two Reuters reporters, Wa Lone and Kyaw Soe Oo, were arrested, it was in part for possession of an image of 10 Rohingya men kneeling, which ran along one of their articles. The photojournalist who took the picture remained free, said the photographer involved in the *Beyond the Prison Gate* exhibition.

PERFORMANCE ART
According to key informants and FGD participants, the most popular forms of artistic political commentary are Thangyat and Anyeint performances, which usually address federalism, equality, Government and military corruption, rising commodity prices, illegal trade or exploitation of natural resources, electricity shortages, or the shortcomings of the 2008 Constitution. FGD respondents noted that the lyrics in Thangyat and Anyeint songs often help them understand key issues.

Thangyat is a traditional performance art, showcased only during the April Thingyan (New Year) Festival, in which groups perform satirical songs to criticize the Government (or, historically, the monarchy) and mirror the feelings of ordinary citizens. Thangyat first emerged during the reign of the Bamar Kings and to this day remains a popular form of satire. Prominent Thangyat groups in Yangon include Oway Voice, the Peacock Generation, and Red of Blue, as well as university student groups.

Similar to Thangyat, Anyeint is a traditional theatre performance art that delivers messages about political and social issues using humor and irony. According to FGD respondents, the most famous Anyeint artists are Zaganar, Thee Lay Thee, and Myittar. Zaganar is particularly known for the use of satire to criticize military generals and to promote human rights, freedom of expression, and democracy. Zaganar has not made many public appearances since the NLD took office, supposedly because of his admiration of Aung San Suu Kyi, whom he referred to as “Auntie Suu” in an interview. The three Anyeint artists were arrested for criticizing the Government in the past but have since been released. Many performance artists, like Zaganar, are less vocal in their criticism of the current government. One prominent actor, Hninsi Anyeint, however, openly criticizes the NLD-led Government, and other famous groups, particularly among Yangon youth, are Hninzi Thakin (Rose Master) and Five Hilarious Men.

CHALLENGES FOR ACTIVISTS

Activism in Yangon is fraught with many challenges. Artists have to be careful about addressing sensitive issues, and many choose to do so by using underground channels or self-censor their work. However, most of the artists and members of bands mentioned in this report were willing to be interviewed by local Mekong Economics researchers, indicating that activists do not exist completely underground as they once did.

CENSORSHIP

The threat of state censorship and arrest are ubiquitous and are the most serious threat to artistic expression and activism in Yangon. A member of Generation Wave noted with frustration that the Government often invokes Article 66(D) of the telecommunications law, which is supposed to restrict defamation and hate speech but is often used to punish activists and arrest artists. Fear of arrest has led to self-censorship, which includes not mentioning specific persons or events.

FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY

The Government also restricts activists’ freedom of expression by withholding permission to hold concerts and other public events. According to a sculptor interviewed for this report, the Government does not support the display of contemporary art in public, making it difficult for artists to use public spaces in Yangon to feature prominent pieces.

SOCIETY’S PERCEPTION AND RECEPTION

30 “Interview: The comedian Zarganar stands up to tyranny in Myanmar,” The Financial Times (London, UK) October 3, 2014. https://www.ft.com/content/e5adbc3c-49bc-11e4-80f6-00144feab7de
Society’s perception of activists is another challenge for artists. Owing to Myanmar’s traditional culture, most people, including the FGD participants, favor traditional art over modern forms of expression for political and social activism, so contemporary artists and musicians have a smaller, largely urban, following. The influence of punk rock bands and other counterculture displays are limited to Yangon’s youths who, at least somewhat, identify with that particular cultural genre. Art activists’ influence is in direct correlation with how popular (or not) their medium is with the general Yangon public. The more popular the music genre or art form, the larger the audience, and therefore the bigger the reach of activists’ messages.

LIMITED COLLABORATION WITH OTHER ADVOCACY GROUPS
People interviewed for this report noted that activists rarely collaborate with civil society organizations, nongovernmental organizations, or international organizations. While these organizations – among them the British Council, the Goethe-Institut Myanmar, the Institut Français de Birmanie, My Yangon My Home, Turning Tables Myanmar, and the Index on Censorship – are helpful in raising awareness and engaging some artists for major events, the Rebel Riot musician stressed that relying on funding and platforms from these institutions could limit or undermine their chosen form of expression.

CONCLUSION

Despite exposure to and use of modern forms of expression – activism on social media, punk rock, photography, videography, graffiti art and sculpture – the traditional forms of satire, Thingyat and Anyient, continue to be the most popular forms of activism in Yangon. Underground countercultures reach a much smaller audience.

Social perceptions, while playing a role, are not a huge stumbling block for activists, except for those who engage in artistic expression perceived negatively by the general public, like graffiti art and punk rock. Government restrictions on the freedom of expression are the biggest obstacle for artists engaging in activism, because it imposes limits on the type of art they produce. Activist artists live under constant fear of arrest.

There has been some growth in galleries and exhibitions, with social media expanding their reach. However, public spaces for art installations are off limits, further curbing artists’ abilities to reach the general public with their message. The growth of social media holds hope for a wider audience, but artists in Yangon continue to face significant barriers to a fuller range of expression and freedom.

ANNEX: EXAMPLES OF ACTIVIST ART AND ARTISTS IN YANGON
The punk group Rebel Riot promoting coexistence of religions for which they came under fire from Ma Ba Tha.\(^\text{31}\)

A member of the Peacock Generation Thangyat group who was imprisoned in April due to criticizing the military in a performance.\(^\text{32}\) This Thangyat group is one of the more well-known, according the FGD respondents.


Phyu Mon, a prominent performance artist, using balloons to represent the pressures of censorship on the media in Myanmar.\textsuperscript{33}

Street artist Arkar Kyaw creates a mural welcoming Barack Obama to Yangon in 2012.\textsuperscript{34}


A mural under a bridge on the Yangon circle line. Much of Yangon’s street art “exists in a murky legal area”. Regardless of its subject matter, some members of the public consider it a form of activism.\textsuperscript{35}

A cartoon drawn by Lai Lone in January 2019, depicting the instability of dam construction projects in Myanmar.\textsuperscript{36}


Letters to Caesar performing at the Voice of Youth music festival in 2017. A link to their performance can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/TurningTablesMyanmar/videos/1708905925799431/?v=1708905925799431