

Interview with Kyaw Kyaw from The Rebel Riot Band

Hein Htet Kyaw

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When Rebel Riot was interviewed, the topic almost always revolved on punk music or the larger Spring upheaval in Myanmar, both nationally and internationally. This talk, I hope, will serve as a historical documentation of the Rebel Riot's participation in local anti-fascist, grass-roots organizing, and mutual aid social movements.

Interview with Kyaw Kyaw from Rebel Riot

***Hein:** Since most of your interviews on how you became a punk are available elsewhere, I will skip it. I would like to focus more on anarchism as an ideology and way of life. I would like you to share with us since when you were influenced by anarchism? Also, can you also share with us the link between Punk as a subculture and Anarchism as a way of life or ideology?*

Kyaw Kyaw: I was attracted to anarchism since I was around teenager. However, my first attraction to anarchism was its logo. Around 17 years old, among the punk scene, several logos can be seen, like nazi logo, queen of England logo and anarchist logo. I wasn't fully aware of its meaning at that time given my young age. My first understanding of anarchism around that time was total freedom with chaos. We always hang out with friends, fight with others, act like gangsters and so on. That's the way I understood anarchism. I think that's around 2005.

Later in 2009, I got introduced to the internet. I managed to visit myspace and some other websites like "punk rocker website" and so on, where I can download a lot of global punk music. However, given my limited English, my interaction with them is too superficial, like asking "How are you" and so on in broken English. Around 2009, I managed to use social media, and got a lot of connections with punks from other countries. I got to know some punks from Germany, and they taught me these basic tenets of anarchism like the essence of red-black flags, black bloc, anarchism and anti-FA movement around 2011. Since then, I managed to know its foundation belief and started to know that anarchism is not about chaos (in mainstream term anarchy), but about self-principles.

In 2014, there was a group of activists with Guy Fawkes masks carrying red-black flags and protested against the education system. They called themselves "Anonymous Burma". I saw that article and photos in Irrawaddy newspaper. I was excited to know and connect with them. I reached out to them via their official Facebook page. Fortunately, it turned out that they know me as well. Later, we managed to hang out and get to know each other. Some members of them

from “Anonymous Burma” were from ABFSU (All Burma Federation of Student Union) who were not satisfied and allergic to the democratic centralism of ABFSU. That’s where I upgraded my anarchism to the next level, understanding more of other local anarchists’ perspective and so on.

At the same time, I saw some Facebook groups where atheists and non-religious people share their thoughts founded by Thiha. That’s how I became an anarchist. I was not attracted to anarchism as a theory but more of self-principle and way of life.

Hein: *Regarding Food not Bombs, can you please share with us how you founded Food not Bombs. Thiha JP shared me that you and him co-founded Food not Bombs. How do you find this idea of community sharing and mutual aid applicable to Burma? Also, the name “Food Not Bombs”, does it come from affiliation with global Food Not Bombs movement? Or was it more of like local organic movement first, and then got affiliated with the global Food Not Bombs movement.*

Kyaw Kyaw: In 2013, I was fortunate to have an opportunity to visit Indonesia for a band show. I saw a logo there, with a carrot. I asked the comrades from Indonesia, and they explained me about the basic tenets of Food not Bombs which inherently is about grass root community organising and mutual aid which are anti-capitalist in their essence. I discussed with my band and other local punks in Burma.

Given the fact that our lyrics are central to anti-authoritarian, anti-corruptions and anti-capitalism, we wished to practice what we preach. We believed that preaching is so easy that everyone can do it. However, grassroots community organising and mutual aid are extremely difficult to initiate, let alone to sustain it for years. So, we all started together with this small project. That was easy to convince all of the punks in our community, since most of us are from poor working class.

I remember our first Food not Bombs project. We decided not to drink beers and alcohol for a few days. Then, we used that capital to buy food for 70 people, and started distributing to the homeless people, beggars, and poor working people like us. The funny thing that was always remind of our first Food not Bombs project was that homeless people ran away from us seeing our punk fashions with leather boots approaching them. Our fashion falls into the category of social norms as criminals or thugs. So, they were fear of us, doing bad things to them. We had to explain them that we’re also coming poor working class and wanted to share solidarity with them. Later, they became appreciated of us and started to feel happy seeing us.

We just founded a local Food not Bombs, without any involvement of global Food not Bombs.

Hein: *I remember Food not Bombs distribute to the Myanmar Students Long March in 2014. I was there as a fellow student from University of Dental Medicine since we didn’t have a proper student union yet. I saw a lot of Food not Bombs people distributing foods near Sule Pagoda. Can you elaborate more about it?*

Kyaw Kyaw: In 2014, I met a lot of anarchist-leaned or left-leaned student activists due to the nationwide Student Protests against the education reform laws of Quasi-military government. There, I met a lot of new faces from student activists from ABFSU. We discussed more about anarchism and so on.

Some of those from “Anonymous Burma” decided to join us with “Food not Bombs Yangon”. We distribute foods and drink to the students protesting at Sule and also at the Myanmar Students Long March against Myanmar National Education Law 2014. We even sell Che T-shirts and punk-related T-shirts at a small punk shop at Sule. Some of those student union members who are sympathetic to anarchism and communism hanged out with us and we became a community

gradually. Thiha JP, a working-class anarchist organizer along with some student activists from ABFSU circle joined us too.

Here, I would like to share that most of the topics the student activists mentioned “like base and superstructure as well as some other theoretical terms”, me and my fellow comrades from poor working class couldn’t understand. It could be due to our lack of education or knowledge of global politics. We didn’t know any of those figures they mentioned like “Proudhon” and “Bakunin”, etc. That eventually led to a crack among us. They had this superior mentality of knowing these theories due to their rich socio-economic status whereas we have this poor working class syndicalist mentality.

Hein: *I remember we had a terrible flood in Burma, affecting almost all of the territory in Burma, resulting in hundreds of deaths and affecting up to hundreds of thousands of people around 2015. Yangon was almost safe from it. That’s when “Food not Bombs Yangon” became popular across the whole country, as far as I remember. That’s where “Food not Bombs Yangon” was reported across all the nationwide media with the title “Charity Punks”.*

Kyaw Kyaw: Just before that flood, we were helping children from HIV center. We were short of budgets and decided to entertain people on the street as a fundraising method for them. One or two members from “Anonymous Burma” joined us. We also did the same with the fundraising for the victims of the flood. That’s where NewsWatch journal and some other local media started to feature us. That’s where people get shocked by our image. Traditionally, people in Burma thought that punks always are involved in drugs, street fights, and alcohol. In reality, they’re seeing us as fundraisers for the people who are in need of solidarity. People told us that we’ve good and kind hearts. I personally believe that being “good” is a norm set by society that has no meaning though.

That might be in coincidence, but I think our initiatives of fundraising with street entertainment became a trend at that time. I saw a lot of student groups did the similar thing when it comes to the fundraising for the victims of the flood across the whole country.

Hein: *Can you also share us about how “Books not Bombs” was founded too? “Books not Bombs” unlike “Food not Bombs” indeed was the original idea, right? I don’t see global movement like that.*

Kyaw Kyaw: There was one Food not Bombs project we did for a remote area called “Moe Nyo”. It was for a poor regional area where they’re around 8 schools. We were informed that a lot of charitable organisations simply paid the cash, talked to the teachers and headmaster of the school but never interacted with the children. We went there and spend the whole amount of time playing traditional folk games with the children. That act was surprisingly revolutionary for them. The headmaster and the teachers were almost crying and thanks us for our hospitality to the children. That’s where we’re different from just charitable organisations. They requested us to come frequently. Since they had around 500 children from poor socioeconomic background, we also thought of a way to enhance our interactions with them. That’s where we found “Books not Bombs”. We produced and read LGBTQ+ friendly books, and kids-friendly books on social movements of inclusivity along with the children. We even encouraged the teachers and the headmaster to read the books too.

Traditionally, the teachers and the headmaster are socially conservatives in Burma. However, the headmaster there, was a student of U Aung Thin. He was surprisingly progressive and a fan of Che Guevara. He allowed us to read those books with the children together. That’s one of our first “Books not Bombs” projects.

Hein: *Given that he is a student of U Aung Thin. U Aung Thin was also a student of the monks Venerable Ukkattha (one of the pioneers of Marxism in Burma) and Venerable Vasava (a pioneer of the anti-religion atheism movement in Burma), I can relate how he is acceptable of progressivism and a fan of Che Guevara. I am pretty sure you're aware of Venerable Ukkattha as he is like the central figure who radicalised almost all of the communist and socialist leaders in Burma to the far-left politics including the General Aung San, the father of the nation. But you might not know about Venerable Vasava. I have some books and audio recordings of him that survived the censorship of all the government under blasphemy laws. I will share with you soon. The student of the anti-religion atheist monk Venerable Vasava, Venerable Malavara, was forcefully dragged to mental asylum by the direct order of the Minister of Religious Affairs and Culture during BSPP era and was forced to sign the papers saying that he would never spread that kind of materialist Buddhism again in order to get out of mental asylum. Those oppressions were totally insane and beyond imaginations. Imagine people like Stephen Batchelor dragged to mental asylum for their books. Such censorship was beyond insane. Going back, how frequent are the activities of "Food not Bombs" and "Books not Bombs"?*

Kyaw Kyaw: We cook, organise and distribute foods for all the people in need under "Food not Bombs Yangon" once a week and we organise and distribute books for the poor children in needs under "Books not Bombs Myanmar" once in every 3 months. For "Food not Bombs Yangon", we don't have to travel beyond Yangon. However, for "Books not Bombs Myanmar", we have to travel across Burma, sometimes to poor remote areas.

Hein: *I notice a lot of anarchists among Rebel Riot and FNB-Yangon circle are also active in a social movement called "Free shop" that accepts people to donate their items and distribute back to the people in need for free. Can you elaborate more about it too?*

Kyaw Kyaw: In 2018, Rebel Riot had a tour to Europe. There, I saw similar initiative among the Europe anarchists doing "Free Shop" kind of initiatives. So, we decided to share it to our comrades from "Food Not Bombs Yangon" and other anarchists. Our initiative again broke another social norm that the "Free shop" will run out of items in a few days because of the greedy and opportunistic people. In contrary, that didn't happen. "Free shop" still is running fine even at this time of terrible economic conditions after the coup. This "free shop", "Food Not Bombs Yangon" and "Books not Bombs Myanmar" as three social movements are loosely affiliated to Rebel Riot band and our broader working class anarchist circle. The message of our whole movement is "anti-war", "solidarity" and "mutual aid" which are inherently anti-capitalist.

Hein: *I remember that me and you had the formal contact around 2016 with the help of a progressive Buddhist monk with a nickname "Venerable Zero". I remember meeting you first time at a small meeting with "Walei Society" that generally translated and distributed alternative spirituality to Theravada Buddhism just like Zen Buddhism and Osho's thought. I consider "Walei Society" and their contribution to Burma as a spiritual revolution that tried to offer alternative spirituality to Theravada Buddhism with Zen Buddhism, Tao (Dao) and Osho's thought. What's your involvement with them? Generally speaking, most of the other influential figures of anarchists from Burma are either atheists or materialistic (more related to Marxism), and simply conflate spiritualism with religion. Can you also explain how anarchism as a way of life and punk culture as a sub-culture can be reconciled with spirituality movements like Zen Buddhism, Tao and Osho's plural spiritualism? Also, "Venerable Zero" was a central figure to interfaith movement in Burma. So, what is your position on the interfaith movement in Burma?*

Kyaw Kyaw: I was born into Buddhist family. So, I had this formal education on Buddhism. However, I didn't like the superstitions among Buddhist society as a rebel youth. On the other hand, since I was young, I was introduced to meditation practices. I like the peacefulness I encounter while I'm meditating. That somewhat influenced me on my future understanding of Buddhism. For me, we have two struggles. One struggle is the material world, where we witness the cruelty of the ruling class, corruptions, oppressions, suppressions of the dissents, terrorism and the struggle for bread. Another struggle is the spiritual or mental world, where we face anger, jealousy, hatred and so on.

Also, I was never impressed by those so-called anarchists who simply parroted and quoted which thinker said what and so on. Not all but most of those anarchists from student class either live with the financial support of parents or relatives. I haven't seen those anarchists from student class implementing these theories into their daily lives or getting involved deeply with social movements. Those anarchists from student class quoted a lot of those anarchist thinkers and posted on Facebook but we seldomly get their involvement on the social movement. That's where "Walei Society" impressed me. "Walei Society" focus more on the individual and way of life. They produced and published around hundreds of books about alternative spiritualism that directly challenged the superiority complex of the Theravada Buddhism. I believe that no matter how big their words are, what they're doing in their daily struggles are the actual words. It doesn't mean I'm against bookworms and political education. I have seen a lot of humble activists who use normal working-class language but still behaving like anarchists in real life. I have seen humble activists who balance both theory and reality without looking down on the working-class anarchists. Those who use big words for their political gains, I am not that impressed by them.

That's how I reached to a conclusion that anarchism for me is a way of life where I will self-principle myself and use it as a lifestyle. I also advanced my spiritualism with Zen Buddhism, Tao (Dao), meditation, and Osho's thought. In my understanding, anarchism is not a dogmatic faith of messianic doctrine like other philosophies. Anarchism is about individual liberty, which is inclusive of hostility towards the state, capitalism, and so on.

For me, punk as a subculture stands for "DIY culture" which stands for "Do It Yourself". Anarchism as a way of life also stands for self-principle for individual liberty, which stands for "self-awareness and self-sustainability". Buddhist meditation as a practise has the essence of "At-tahi Attano Nato" which stands for "rely on self". That's when I notice all of these are saying the same thing which is about the individual.

However, my understanding of Buddhism always was different from the political Buddhism of right-wing nationalism in Burma. For that reason, I won't be pawn for them in their chess game. Buddhism is indeed interesting. The more I understand about Buddhism, the more I am confident that I'm not a Buddhist in term of religious identity. I was liberated from the fears of offending Buddhism as a religion. When we were young, we were taught that if we disrespect Buddha statues, we will go to hell. Now, I am confident to pee on Buddha statues, while still respecting his philosophy.

Even though I had some connections with interfaith movements, I personally don't believe in interfaith movements. It's more sort of virtue signalling movements with internal power struggles between the groups who privately believe they have the only truth.

Hein: *I agree with you on the connection between spiritualism with anarchism and also on oxymoronic position of the interfaith movement in Burma. I agree with your position on some privileged*

anarchists in Burma. That's why I stayed away from them. By the way, I remember you had a direct confrontation with far-right ultranationalist political Buddhist organisation called "Patriotic Association of Myanmar" which we call "Ma Ba Tha". You were modelling with Buddhist monk uniform with punk fashion. That triggered them. Can you please share us more about it since it was never recorded properly by the mainstream media locally and internationally?

Kyaw Kyaw: That's a long story. I will have to explain since their existence as a grassroots movement called 969 movement around 2012. As you know, an Arakanese Buddhist woman called Ms. Thidar Htwe was raped by three youth rapists who happened to be from Muslim Rohingya community. They somehow dragged the whole identity instead of focusing on the individuals and the whole Arakan-Rohingya riot happened in Arakan. We produced a song called "Fuck Religious War" and stayed against this fear mongering politics of both Buddhist nationalists and Islamists. However, the riot spread to the whole nation. The whole Buddhist community stood in solidarity with the Buddhist Arakanese population against Rohingya people and in broader Muslim population. A lot of racism, xenophobia and fear mongering politics happened on both sides. That later escalate into broader anti-Muslim bigotry racist politics with 969 movement. As soon as we notice the grassroots involvement and influential status of 969 movement, we, Rebel Riot, created a new song called "Stop Racism, against 969, Fuck Fascist Monks" against the 969 movement solely. Our position was endorsed by the progressive movement and later got noticed by an international media outlet called AP News. We used the word "Fascist Monk" together. Given the Buddhist monk history of being peaceful, silent, and pro-democracy, they were surprised and wrote an article about it. Since then, a lot of international media featured us on their articles. They featured us with a lot of articles that stated, "Punks Break Burma's Silence on Religious Attacks", as if we were hero or something. It's almost like some revolutionaries from religious far-right countries like Iran attacked Allah as a social movement or something. Indeed, we were not that influential at that time. Honestly, we were so scared too since that time we were under quasi-military government of U Thein Sein. Some local media translated the whole articles and published it back in Burmese. We indeed received a lot of backlashes and even death threats for those. On the other side, that's where we became as influential as they claimed in the articles. We were even scared to go outside for a few weeks given the amount of death threats we received. However, we were lucky. They didn't try to come after us at that time since the whole 969 movement was more interested in recruiting the grassroots.

But that incident you mentioned was around 2017. The 969 movement reached its peak at 2014–2015 until they decided to go after NLD and Aung San Suu Kyi. After that, they sort out become weaker. Our Rebel Riot band was invited to Thailand for a tour around 2017. We were requested by an alternative photographer for a blasphemous but yet interfaith photo. It was called "Sons of Anarchy". We dressed as Buddha (a monk), Jesus and Shiva in Punk outfits. The main message of the photo we intended to offer was that "the religious leaders are having fun together and get along with each other, but yet the followers are killing each other". We posted the photos on our official page and even mentioned Venerable Wirathu and assaulted him on Facebook. That backfired us. The next day, our post was shared by tens of thousands of people. Win Ko Ko Latt, an ultranationalist grassroots organiser of 969 movement reposted the photos and started to organise a movement against us. Even his post was shared by thousands of people. I had to edit the post to look more appropriated. We received a lot of death threats again. They targeted against me specifically since I was the one who dressed as Buddha (a monk). DVB reached out to me amidst the whole controversy.

At the time, I was more afraid of the death threat over getting arrested for blasphemy. Given the grassroots and vigilante population 969 movement had, that was not safe at all for me. That affected all the Food not Bombs Yangon, Books not Bombs, and Free Shop. 969 movement somehow managed to propagate me as an enemy of the whole Buddhism to all the people. For all of our social movements, Food not Bombs Yangon, Books not Bombs, and Free Shop, we are dealing day to day basis with the grassroots people which includes religious people, I got worried that they might also attack the social movement for my involvement of the photo shooting. I reached out to Win Ko Ko Latt, surprisingly he was humble and deleted his post as per my request. We mutually agreed to meet and discuss the details to solve the controversy. When I arrive to their headquarters of Patriotic Association of Myanmar at Insein, there were a lot of monks in the room, just like how we used to sit in the internet café. Seems like they've some sort IT related operations going on. I told them that I want to solve the conflict mutually as I didn't really want the grassroots especially the working-class people to hate us. Since they are the people, we always encounter and organise at our social movements. Win Ko Ko Latt on behalf of the Patriotic Association of Myanmar promised us that they will meet with us peacefully and solve it properly in front of the media, etc.

At first, I was thinking of how I would dispute their points and so on as if I'm Socrates or Castro or something. I was hoping of a civic debate and even planned to justify my actions with my understanding of Buddhism. In reality, once we arrived at their place, there are hundreds of 969 supporters waiting for us at the monastery. They surrounded us while we're talking to their leaders. Since before we started, they demanded us to apologise in front of all their supporters and they were no media except the right-leaned pro-969 media. We tried to push back but since we were outnumbered as a few of us from Rebel Riot went there. One of the monks from the Patriotic Association of Myanmar told us that their Theravada Buddhism is currently challenged by internal threats like us (those who were born as Buddhists) and external threats like Muslims and Christians. I response back that in my understanding of Buddhism, the internal threats are not people, but greed, anger, and ignorance. They started shouting at us, demanding us to sign of apology letter, and so on. Those friends who came along with me, also insisted me to sign the apology letter since we were outnumbered and some of them even had weapons with them. They never gave me a chance to speak anymore after my response. Finally, I had to sign for an apology letter, just to survive there. I cried like a kid after all the incident as I felt ashamed becoming a tool for their propaganda machinery. They put those photos across all their media and celebrated as if they have won a battle against us, the progressive social movements.

Hein: *So, they demanded apology from you not to sue you under blasphemy law? Given their influence around that time, that would be a terrible experience for you. Being targeted by the nation-wide influential far-right ultranationalist political organisation is apparently not favourable. But I think it was a milestone of your activism. The more important question is that did you find leftists in general and anarchists from Burma showing solidarity with you? I'm pretty sure global punk scene will show unconditional solidarity with you. However, what about local anarchists and leftists in general? Did they show solidarity with you in face of the nation-wide influential far-right ultranationalist political organisation targeting you?*

Kyaw Kyaw: Local punk anarchist bands and those from Rebel Riot, Food not Bombs Yangon, Free Shop, and Books not Bombs showed solidarity with me, some even reached out frequently to me after the incident. However, there were a lot of anarchists, so called anti-fascists, and student activists who were making fun of me, for being forced to apologise. I was already depressed,

seeing them making fun of me, instead of showing solidarity, made it worse. Some international punk anarchist bands issued statement of solidarity for us, some bands from UK even organised events for us. That was a big relief. However, there were a lot of local anarchists who called themselves anti-fascists as well as a lot of students and activists, making fun of my situation instead of showing solidarity. I was hoping for them to show solidarity at least in public and criticise us privately for our tactical error. It never happened, yet they publicly shamed us for signing the apology letter. I know we were wrong; they were not wrong to criticise us. However, we didn't expect such level of public ashaming as if we were some idiots. They even told us that "Pussy Riot" from Moscow were better and braver than us. I felt as if we got attacked from behind within the left during a death match with the far-right groups. If I were them, I would start a social movement called "Saffron movement" and do series of photo shooting along with monk robes. So, all progressives across the country can participate, with a hope of mass involvement. They never did that. Even now in 2024, there are some leftists who are still making fun of us for being forced to apologise. Of course, we will never get over those traumas too. Looking back, I learned a lot out of that experience. Some of those from the left accused us of betraying our own values for signing the apology letter. I admit that we were naïve and ignorant of the traps set by the far-right fascists, but we never betrayed our values. We were outnumbered and no mass movement or digital social movement showed up in solidarity for us locally except some closed comrades of us. I can take the experience as something we were naïve, but I would like to deny those accusations of us betraying our own values from here. We, Rebel Riot, never betrayed our values of punk subculture, individualist anarchism and anti-fascism.

Hein: *It's so sad to hear that. I was away from the local left scene at that time for some other religious reformist activism I was stuck onto. I would like to apologise you from here for not vocal enough for that. I was under the radar of 969 movement for resurrecting the censored progressive Buddhism(s) they oppressed. I was aware of the situations, but I was not too detached from the local left scene, and I couldn't really criticise them public for both blasphemy laws and cyber laws. Another one is that I remember there were some conflicts between "Free Shop Yangon" and the cops. Can you also elaborate more about it?*

Kyaw Kyaw: That's around 2019. We were setting up our mobile "Free Shop Yangon" in a street event. We also setup a tiny Punk outfit sales shop within our space. Someone reported to the regional council and the police came to us and arrested us for "illegal possession of alcohol" and "disturbing public". What's irony was that we were not drinking at the day and the cops who came and arrested had alcohol bottles in their pocket and drunk.

Hein: *Thanks a lot for all the answers. I think that incident of not sharing solidarity but blaming for being bullied by the far-right, that's something we, as the broader left in Burma, should practice self-criticism. I notice the existence of those arrogant minority of anarchist and philosopher-wannabe left. I don't want to name call them here. Even if we exclude those minority of neoliberal academics and their pseudointellectual followers who only like to boss around on Facebook without any involvement on class struggle, religious reformism, gender liberation movement, the struggle for self-determinism, and the universal human rights, we still have a considerable number of anarchists and working-class activists in Burma to talk with the working class and the grassroot communities about a lot of issue we are facing in Burma including all of the class struggle, religious reformism, gender liberation movement, the struggle for self-determinism, and the social movements for universal human rights.*

Also, globally and locally, most of the time Rebel Riot was interviewed, it was always about either punk music or the broader Spring revolution in Myanmar. I hope this conversation serves as a historical record of the Rebel Riot's involvement in the local social movements of mutual aid, grass root organising, and anti-fascism.

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