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Myanmar Immigrants In U.S. Worry For Families Back Home As Post-Coup Tensions Rise

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ASHLEY WESTERMAN

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A demonstrator in Washington, D.C., protesting the recent military takeover of Myanmar's government holds a sign featuring the face of the Min Aung Hlaing, the coup leader. There have been gatherings to protest the coup in front of the Myanmar military attaché's office in Northwest D.C. nearly every day since it happened on Feb. 1.

Ashley Westerman/NPR

Tens of thousands of demonstrators continue to take to the streets across Myanmar to protest the military coup of the government there last week — despite the military declaring martial law in cities across the country and banning public gatherings larger than five people at once. But as the aftermath continues to unfold, people in the U.S. with deep ties to the Southeast Asian country can only watch and wait.

Tensions have escalated between demonstrators and security forces following the Myanmar military's take over of the civilian government on Feb. 1, citing fraud in the country's November general elections. Since taking power and detaining ruling party leaders, including Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, the military, known as the Tatmadaw, has cut off the Internet twice and blocked various social media platforms for four days. Those moves effectively eliminated communication between the Myanmar diaspora and their friends and family.

"Our overseas Myanmar community, we cannot sleep, no?" says Ei Aye, a demonstrator at an anti-coup rally held over the weekend at the Myanmar military attache's office in Washington, D.C. While there has been a gathering at the office in Northwest D.C. nearly every day to condemn the coup since it happened, Myanmar immigrants have been speaking out across the U.S. in places such as New York City, Indianapolis and Ownesboro, Ky.



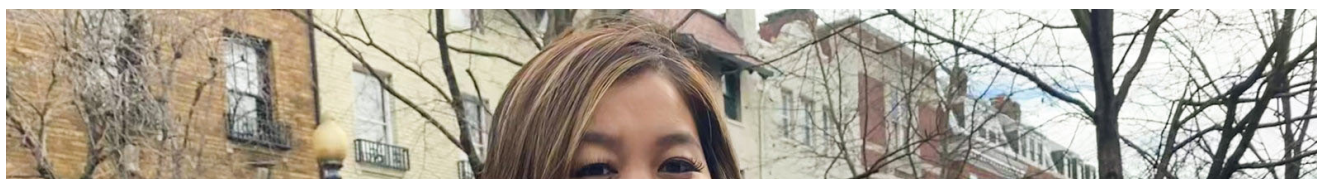
ASIA

Tens Of Thousands Rally In Myanmar Protesting Military Coup

"We're so worried about our people," she said.

Ei Aye, who drove from Rockville, Md., was particularly worried because she couldn't reach her mother when the military blocked most telecommunications over the weekend. She said she tried multiple work-arounds to try and get in touch, but hadn't been able to connect with anyone in Myanmar for 24 hours.

Another demonstrator, Khine Sann, also of Rockville, Md., told NPR she couldn't sleep at night because of the worry over the well-being of her extended family.





Demonstrator Khine Sann, 36, of Rockville, Md., holds a sign in support of the National League for Democracy, the ruling party lead by Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi, who was detained by the military on Feb. 1 and has not been heard from since.

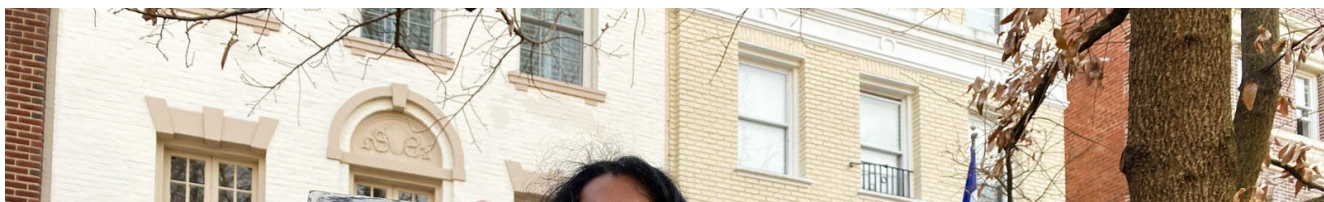
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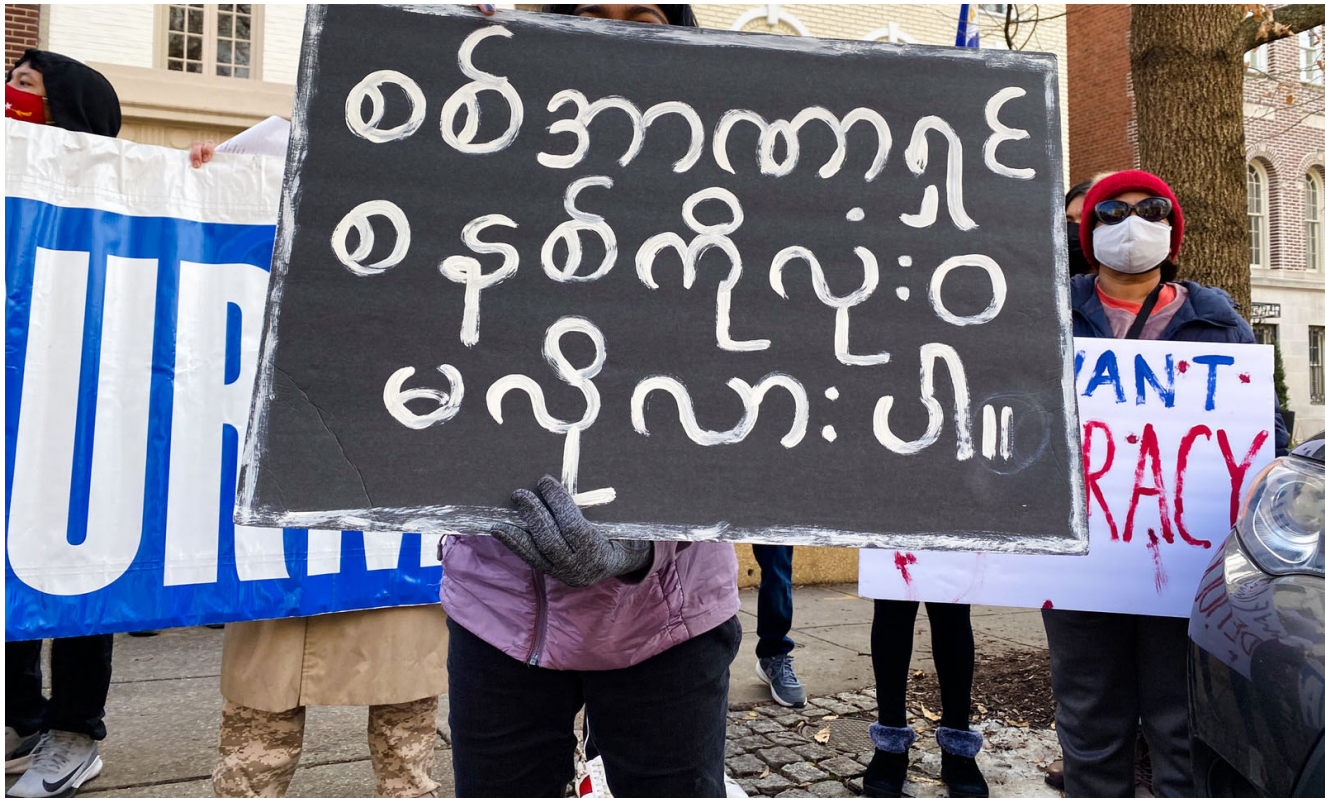
"I'm very frustrated. I feel very sorry for our country," Khine Sann said, "especially for the future generation because we don't want our future generations to suffer what we've been through."

Khine Sann knows many people who came to the U.S. because of the previous military coups, including her own husband. Myanmar has experienced multiple military coups since the country became independent from the British in 1948.

Aung Min Naing, with the California-based Network of Myanmar American Association, estimates "half of the population" of immigrants from Myanmar is in the U.S. because of military coups.

While the 2010 Census puts the number of Americans of Burmese descent at some 100,000, more recent surveys put the number higher. The largest communities can be found in and around Minneapolis-St. Paul, Dallas-Fort Worth and New York City.





A demonstrator holds a sign that reads: "Absolutely against the military/authoritarian state" in Burmese during a protest in Washington, D.C., of the recent military coup in Myanmar.

Ashley Westerman/NPR



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Myanmar Blocks Facebook, Twitter As Anti-Coup Protests Grow

Aung Min Naing, who wrote a report for the U.S. Census on his community, sees the migration of Myanmar immigrants into the U.S. in three phases.

The first wave came after the 1968 military coup, which ushered in one-party rule and more than a decade of martial law. The second wave, he says, arrived after the 1988 student uprising and subsequent military coup, during which thousands of protesters and soldiers are thought to have perished though official numbers will likely never be known.

A flood of refugees entering the U.S. from Myanmar starting about a decade ago makes up the third wave. Refugees fled to refugee camps near the border Myanmar-Thailand border to escape the unrest in 1988, Aung Min Naing says.





A demonstrator holds up the "three-finger salute" during a recent anti-coup demonstration in front of the Myanmar military attaché's office in Washington, D.C. The salute, which originated in the *Hunger Games*, has been used in both Thailand and Myanmar as a symbol of solidarity for democracy movements.

Ashley Westerman/NPR

"And some of them, refugees who settled here, they were born in the refugee camps, those kids," Aung Min Naing says. "They've never been to Burma."

Parents and kids had to wait 10 or more years to be resettled and they really started coming over to the U.S. in 2005 and 2007, Aung Min Naing says. Between 2008 and 2017, roughly one in four U.S.-bound refugees came from Myanmar, reports PRI's The World, citing Department of State data.

Aung Min Naing himself left Myanmar after 1988. He says during the unrest that year the military junta brought in troops from the borderlands into the cities to quell the massive demonstrations.

"They have no sympathy for people, they just shoot, right?" Aung Min Naing says. "Right now we see the police are cooperating but if they're going to start using the playbook like from back in 1988, it's going to get bad."

While he hopes history does not repeat itself in 2021, Aung Min Naing also knows there's little he and others in the U.S. can do other than continue to bring awareness to the situation on the ground in Myanmar.

military coup myanmar

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