

Activists mark 30th anniversary of Myanmar uprising

By Grace Brown and Min Kyi Thein
The Associated Press

YANGON, Myanmar — Hundreds of people commemorated the 30th anniversary of Myanmar's 8888 uprising, a seminal and ultimately bloody episode in the Southeast Asian nation's struggle for democracy.

The flag of the uprising — a fighting peacock — flew on the campus and in a hall of Yangon University, where activists, including those who took part in the mass revolt, heard speeches and viewed exhibits that recalled the events.

The August 8, 1988 uprising came after more than a quarter-century of military rule and international isolation that had condemned once-prosperous Myanmar — then called Burma — to poverty. More than 1 million people are estimated to have protested throughout the country, driven to take to the streets after the government's sudden demonetization of the country's currency, which wiped out many people's savings.

The revolt dislodged longtime dictator Ne Win but was violently crushed by the army in the weeks that followed. Estimates of the number of deaths range as high as 3,000. Although an equally repressive set of generals took over, the events also marked the founding of the pro-democracy movement of Aung San Suu Kyi, which finally took power peacefully in 2016, although under a restrictive constitution that forced it to share power with the military.

Many of the leading figures of the 1988 uprising are still active in political and social work, and several recalled the momentous historical events and how they started.



"Suddenly, someone put out the student flag, which had been hidden under his shirt, and waved it," recounted former student protest leader and 88 Generation activist Min Ko Naing. "At the same time, another person brought a bamboo stick to the fence and tied that flag to the top. All the rest started chanting and waving their posters." All of a sudden, the demonstration had begun, he recalled, adding that it had been "born in our hearts" many years before.

Along with hundreds of others, Min Ko Naing was arrested in the army takeover that followed. He spent approximately 19 years behind bars, before finally being released in 2012 during a mass pardon of political prisoners.

An exhibit inside the university showed in detail what took place in 1988. People young and old stopped to read carefully

preserved archives of journals and newspapers, hanging like ornaments.

Members of the 88 Group, an association of protest veterans, also showed visitors how word spread to the streets in the pre-internet era, relying on foreign radio stations including Voice of America and BBC. Using simple manual printing



UPRISING ANNIVERSARY. Members of the National League for Democracy party (left photo) show respect in front of the numbers "8888" during a ceremony marking the 30th anniversary of the pro-democracy uprising, in Yangon, Myanmar. August 8 marked the 30th anniversary of the nationwide protests for democracy against the then-military dictatorship. The protest was referred to as the 8-8-88 (four eights) uprising. In the right photo, a boy holds a portrait of Gen. Aung San at the 30th anniversary ceremony. (AP Photos/Thein Zaw)

techniques, transcripts of the broadcasts were shared in quiet teashops from Yangon to Mandalay, the traditional venues for gossip and discussion.

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