

## International

# Myanmar junta charges Japanese journalist with encouraging dissent

## Breaching immigration law carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison

**YANGON:** A Japanese journalist detained in Myanmar has been charged with breaching immigration law and encouraging dissent against the military, the ruling junta said Thursday. Myanmar's military has clamped down on press freedoms since its coup last year, arresting reporters and photographers as well as revoking broadcasting licences as the country plunged into chaos.

Kubota has previously made documentaries on Myanmar's Muslim Rohingya minority and "refugees and ethnic issues in Myanmar".

Kubota had arrived in Myanmar on July 14 and was filming a "documentary featuring a Myanmar person", his friend Yoshitaka Nitta told a press conference in Tokyo on Wednesday. He is the fifth foreign journalist to be detained in Myanmar, after US citizens Nathan Maung and Danny Fenster, Robert Bociaga of Poland and Yuki Kitazumi of Japan—all of whom were later freed and deported.

Fenster, who was held in May last year as he attempted to leave the country, faced a closed-door trial inside Insein on charges of unlawful association, incitement against the military and breaching visa rules. He was sentenced to 11 years in prison before being pardoned and deported.

### 'War on journalists'

"The regime has declared war on journalists, and 505a is its preferred charge," said Richard Horsey of the International Crisis Group. "This charge against a Japanese journalist shows the regime is determined to continue stifling objective reporting, whether by local or foreign journalists."

Japan's foreign ministry said in a statement that its embassy in Myanmar was "appealing to the Myanmar authorities for the early release of the Japanese man, and will continue to make efforts to gather information and request his early release".

Tokyo is a top donor to Myanmar and has long-standing relations with the country's military. The already isolated junta stoked further international outrage last week when it announced the execution of four prisoners, in the country's first use of capital punishment



**TOKYO:** File photo shows an activist holds a placard of Japanese citizen Toru Kubota, who is detained in Myanmar, during a rally in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Tokyo. — AFP

in decades. "The situation in Burma has gone from bad to worse," United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, using the country's former name, after talks with EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell. Blinken met Borrell on the sidelines of a meeting of Southeast Asian foreign ministers in Cambodia, from which Myanmar's top diplomat has been excluded over the junta's failure to open talks with its political opponents.

More than 2,100 people have been killed in the crackdown on dissent in Myanmar and almost 15,000 arrested, according to a local monitoring group. As of March this year, 48 journalists remain in custody across the country, according to the monitoring group Reporting ASEAN. Only China jailed more reporters than Myanmar last year, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists. — AFP

## Seven decades of China-Taiwan relations

**TAIPEI:** As China embarks on its largest-ever military exercises around Taiwan following US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's visit to Taipei, AFP looks back at relations between the self-governing island and Beijing, which views it as part of China.

### 1949: separation

Mao Zedong's communists take power in Beijing in October 1949 after defeating Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang (KMT) nationalists in a civil war. The KMT flee to the island of Taiwan and form their own government in Taipei in December, cutting off contacts with mainland China. In 1950, Taiwan becomes an ally of the United States, which is at war with communist China in Korea. The US deploys a fleet in the Taiwan Strait to protect its ally from possible attack.

### 1971: Beijing gets UN, US nods

In October 1971, Beijing takes over China's seat at the United Nations, previously held by Taipei. In 1979, the United States cuts formal ties with Taiwan and establishes diplomatic relations with Beijing instead. Washington goes on to develop a nuanced Taiwan policy were it "acknowledges" China's claim to the island, which is not the same as accepting Beijing's claim of sovereignty. The US also maintains trade and military ties with Taipei. It opposes both Taiwanese independence and any attempt by China to forcibly take the island.

### 1987-2004: relations improve

In late 1987, Taiwan residents are for the first time permitted to visit mainland China, allowing families to reunite. In 1991, Taiwan lifts emergency rule, unilaterally ending a state of war with China. The first direct talks between the two sides are held in Singapore two years later. But in 1995, Beijing suspends talks in protest at a visit by Taiwanese president Lee Teng-hui to the United States. In 1996, China tests missiles off Taiwan to deter voters in the island's first democratic

presidential election. In 2000 elections, the KMT loses power in Taiwan for the first time. Over the next few years trade links between the two sides improve.

### 2005-2015: threats and talks

In March 2005, Beijing adopts a law authorising the use of force if Taiwan declares independence. In April, KMT chairman Lien Chan makes a landmark visit to Beijing for talks with Chinese leader Hu Jintao. In 2008, Taiwan and China resume high-level talks after the KMT's Ma Ying-jeou is elected president on a Beijing-friendly platform. In 2010, they sign a sweeping Economic Cooperation Framework Agreement and in 2014 hold the first government-to-government talks since separation.

### 2016: honeymoon over

In January 2016, Tsai Ing-wen, from the traditionally pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party, wins presidential elections. In June, China suspends all communications with Taiwan after the new government fails to acknowledge the "One China" policy. In December 2016, US president-elect Donald Trump breaks with decades of US diplomatic policy by speaking directly, by telephone, with Tsai. In January 2019, Xi Jinping says that the unification of China and Taiwan is "inevitable".

### 2021: US-China tensions

In 2021, Chinese military jets make hundreds of incursions into Taiwan's defence zone. In October, US President Joe Biden says the United States will defend Taiwan if China attacks it, in comments later partly walked back by the White House. Tsai confirms that a small number of US troops are present in Taiwan to help train its forces.

### 2022: Pelosi visit sparks fury

On August 2, after days of speculation and stern warnings from Beijing of unspecified "consequences", US House Speaker Nancy Pelosi lands in Taiwan during a tour of Asia. The highest-profile elected US official to visit the island in 25 years says her visit demonstrates her country's "unwavering commitment to supporting Taiwan's vibrant democracy". A furious China vows "punishment" and launches its largest-ever military exercises in the area, encircling Taiwan on August 4. The exercises include the deployment of fighter jets and warships, and the firing of ballistic missiles. — AFP

## Tuneless Bangladeshi social media star grilled by police

**DHAKA:** An out-of-tune Bangladeshi singer with a huge internet following was hauled in by police at dawn and told to cease his painful renditions of classical songs, sparking a furor on social media. "Hero" Alom, as he styles himself, has amassed nearly two million Facebook followers and almost 1.5 million on YouTube with his unique crooning style and arresting, raunchy videos. One of his numbers, "Arabian Song", in which he appears in traditional Arab clothing on a sand dune with camels superimposed in the background, has garnered 17 million views. But he has also drawn critics' scorn, particularly for versions of classic songs of two beloved national treasures-Nobel laureate Rabindranath Tagore and Bangladesh's national poet Kazi Nazrul Islam.

On Wednesday Alom told AFP that he was "mentally tortured" last week by police who told him to stop performing classical songs, that he was too ugly to be a singer, and to sign an "apology" bond.

"The police picked me up at 6 am and kept me there for eight hours. They asked me why I sing Rabindra and Nazrul songs," he said. Dhaka's chief detective Harun ur Rashid told reporters that Alom had apologised for singing the cherished songs and for wearing police uniforms without permission in his



**DHAKA:** YouTuber Hero Alom speaks during an interview at his office in Dhaka. — AFP

videos. "We received many complaints against him," Harun said. "(He) totally changed the (traditional) style (of singing)... He assured us that he won't repeat this," Harun added.

Farooq Hossain, deputy police commissioner of Dhaka, rejected claims by Alom, 37, that he had also been pressed to change his name. "He is making these comments just to go viral in social media," he told AFP.

Following his ordeal, Alom released a new video depicting himself behind bars in a prison outfit, warbling mournfully that he is about to be hanged. Alom's treatment triggered outrage on social media, with commentators and activists calling it an attack on individual rights—even if his singing grates.

"I am not a fan of your songs or your acting. But if there is an attempt to muzzle your voice, I stand up against it," journalist Aditya Arafat posted. "Don't be broken. You are a hero. No matter what others say, you are a real hero," Sanjida Khatun Rakhi wrote on Alom's Facebook page.—AFP



### Fifth foreign journalist to be detained

Toru Kubota, who was held while covering a protest in Yangon last week, "has been charged under section 505 (a) and under immigration law 13-1", the junta said in a statement. 505 (a) — a law that criminalises encouraging dissent against the military and carries a maximum three-year jail term—has been widely used in the crackdown on dissent.

Breaching immigration law 13-1 carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison. Filmmaker Kubota, 26, was detained near an anti-government rally in Yangon along with two Myanmar citizens. After the charges were filed, he was transferred from police custody to Yangon's Insein prison, a security source told AFP, requesting anonymity.

"He's in good health and embassy officials have visited him already at the police station where he has been detained." According to a profile on FilmFreeway,



**NAIROBI:** A billboard of United Democratic Alliance Party (UDA) presidential candidate William Ruto is seen in Nairobi on August 4, 2022. — AFP

## Kenya's Ruto: Chicken seller turned presidential 'hustler'

**NAIROBI:** Kenya's William Ruto, the sharp-suited deputy president now running for the top office, is one of the wealthiest men in the country but likes to portray himself as a champion of the poor and downtrodden. Despite being dogged by corruption allegations going back years, the ruthlessly ambitious 55-year-old clawed his way to the corridors of power by playing on his religious faith and humble beginnings selling chickens by the roadside.

He has painted the August 9 poll, set to be a two-horse race between Ruto and veteran politician Raila Odinga, as a battle between ordinary "hustlers" and the elite "dynasties" that have dominated Kenyan politics for decades. "We want everyone to feel the wealth of this country. Not just a few at the top," Ruto said as he criss-crossed the country promoting his "bottom-up" economic plan.

Ruto first dipped his toes into politics three decades ago, and has served as deputy president for nine years despite a very public and acrimonious falling out with his boss, the outgoing President Uhuru Kenyatta. The rags-to-riches businessman is making his first stab at the presidency, a post he thought he had in the bag as a reward for supporting Kenyatta in the 2013 and 2017 elections. It was a political marriage of convenience in the aftermath of deadly post-poll violence in 2007-2008 that largely pitted Kikuyus — Kenyatta's tribe — against the Kalenjin, Ruto's ethnic group.

Both men were hauled before the International Criminal Court accused of stoking the ethnic unrest but the cases were eventually dropped, with the prosecution complaining of a relentless campaign of witness intimidation.

### 'Man on a mission'

Their so-called "Uhuruto" alliance began unraveling after Kenyatta stunned the nation in 2018 with a pledge to work with Odinga, his longtime arch-rival who is now running with the endorsement of the ruling Jubilee party.

"I'm a man on a mission," Ruto declared last year, defying the president's call for him to resign as they clashed over Kenyatta's — now failed — bid to change the constitution. Shifting allegiances between political leaders are common in Kenya, where Ruto himself had once lent his support to Odinga before switching to Kenyatta. "Ruto is seen by many people to be one of

the most effective strategists in Kenyan politics," said Nic Cheeseman, a political scientist at the University of Birmingham.

"He's someone with extensive experience of running campaigns, performing very well in campaigns, of seeing politics from both sides. He stood with Odinga, he stood with Kenyatta, he knows most of these figures intimately well, he knows their strengths and weaknesses."

On the increasingly toxic campaign trail, Ruto's venom is now directed as much at Kenyatta as his rival at the ballot box, blaming the government for the country's economic woes and even accusing the president of threatening him and his family.

### 'Perfect storm'

Clad in the bright yellow of his United Democratic Alliance, whose symbol is the humble wheelbarrow, Ruto has been reaching out to those suffering most from the Covid-induced cost of living crisis that has been aggravated by the war in Ukraine.

"I think what Ruto did that was clever is it's the perfect time, he picked the perfect storm," said Kenyan political analyst Nerima Wako-Ojiwa. But she added: "A lot of people have this fear that if he enters leadership, he is going to be the kind of person that we cannot take out."

Observers attribute Ruto's aggressiveness to the fact he has had to struggle to get everything he has achieved in life from his lowly start in Kenya's Rift Valley, the Kalenjin heartland. "I sold chicken at a railway crossing near my home as a child... I paid (school) fees for my siblings," he once said. "God has been kind to me and through hard work and determination, I have something."

His fortune is now said to run into many millions of dollars, with interests spanning hotels, real estate and insurance as well as a vast chicken farm. A teetotal father of six who describes himself as a born-again Christian, Ruto seldom lets a speech go by without thanking or praising God or reciting from the Bible.

He first got a foot on the political ladder — and detractors claim, access to funds — in 1992. After completing studies in botany, he headed the YK'92 youth movement tasked with drumming up support for the autocratic then-president Daniel arap Moi, also a Kalenjin.

In 1997, when he tried to launch his parliamentary career by contesting a seat on his home turf of Eldoret North, Moi told him he was a disrespectful son of a pauper. Undeterred, Ruto went on to clinch the seat, which he retained in subsequent elections. His detractors say he siphoned money from the YK'92 project and used it to go into business, and allegations of corruption and land grabs still hang over him. But he dismisses such claims, once telling local media: "I can account for every coin that I have." —AFP