

Myanmar: Why the coup will fail, and what the Tatmadaw can do about it

Tuesday 23 February 2021, by [Su Min Naing](#) (Date first published: 23 February 2021).

The Tatmadaw underestimated the social forces that are coming together to resist the coup, and it will ruin the country and itself if it fails to negotiate a way out of its own mess.

This year marks eight decades since the formation of the Burma Independence Army, the forerunner of the modern Tatmadaw. Its founders were a band of inexperienced but dedicated patriots who eventually wrestled back independence from colonial powers and rebuilt indigenous sovereignty.

For 80 years, the achievements and failures of the Tatmadaw's founders have shaped the way many people in Myanmar view the institution. The decisions that the current leaders of the Tatmadaw take in the coming days, weeks and months will irrevocably shape how it is seen for the next 80.

The many years already spent under military rule have been hard on the people of Myanmar. The military's mismanagement of the economy has been devastating, and as a security-focused organisation blind to non-traditional security issues it is just not equipped to develop and deliver the many public services – chiefly education and health – that a country needs to function and prosper. Generations of indigenous communities have also endured conditions that can only be described as colonial.

And yet we find ourselves back under military rule. Although the Tatmadaw had always prepared for a scenario in which it would have to “step in” (through the nuclear option of a presidential declaration of a “state of emergency” in the 2008 Constitution), the coup was not pre-ordained. Senior General Min Aung Hlaing's decision to seize power was hasty, and apparently without proper consideration for how the public would respond.

Despite the Tatmadaw's shaky legal reasoning, the concentration of power in Nay Pyi Taw made the mechanics of the coup easy. But the Tatmadaw seems to have expected that after swiftly removing the democratically elected government, it could count on collaboration from various political actors disaffected with National League for Democracy rule. It also thought that it could manage international opinion by making trumped-up voter fraud allegations and accusing the NLD of malfeasance.

What the military didn't count on was the public response to the coup. Millions of people across the country have joined protests, including students, doctors, civil servants and even some of the police tasked with cracking down on demonstrations. Lawyers and analysts have exposed the lack of legal basis for the detention and removal of President U Win Myint, undermining the military's argument that the seizure of power was constitutional. Comical charges against State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint for waving at supporters and importing walkie talkies have further angered the public. Rather than work with the military, many of those who have been most critical of the NLD – including activists, other political parties, business elites and intellectuals – have come out clearly against the coup, and in support of the country-wide Civil Disobedience Movement.

This broad-based resistance leaves the generals with only two possible options.

The first involves standing their ground. This would come at a huge cost – the Tatmadaw would likely have to escalate its crackdown on protesters, for example – and without a guarantee of success; the coup and anything that emerges from it will be poisoned fruit. So even if Min Aung Hlaing handed over power to the winner of a new election, as he has pledged, the new administration would be seen as illegitimate. It would be difficult for the international community to accept such a government – let alone for the people of Myanmar, whose votes in the November election have been invalidated.

The Tatmadaw risks falling into the trap of judging its success by the number of people in the streets. Even if it manages to quell demonstrations, popular resentment will morph from the creative, thoughtful, and passionate public protests we see today into more chronic forms of resistance, led by a generation of young people who are more connected and more exposed to the world, and who have experienced what is possible under a more democratic, liberalised and globally integrated Myanmar. They are now furious at the daylight robbery of their future.

If it sticks to its guns, the Tatmadaw will also struggle to maintain a viable economy. Myanmar is already in the middle of a COVID-related economic slump, and this will only worsen as sanctions and consumer boycotts take hold and foreign investment dries up. The Tatmadaw has already pressured key essential businesses to fall into line with the new regime, according to various industry sources. But at the same time, any co-opted business – whether a bank, telco operator, port, retailer or something else – will become a target for both international and domestic pressure. In this scenario, foreign investment will run for the hills. The expectation of falling back on more aligned trading and investment partners in the region is also misplaced. Neighbours and key economic allies are plugged into global supply chains and financial flows that will put them under pressure to respond appropriately.

The second option would be for the Tatmadaw to uphold its commitment to the people of Myanmar and to seek a peaceful resolution by engaging all legitimate actors in this crisis, in particular the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw. This coalition already includes the NLD, the Kayah State Democratic Party and the Ta'ang National Party, with more parties expected to come on board.

But such a resolution would require a total transformation of the constitution, not least of all to ensure the military cannot repeat its coup of February 1. Reforms are also needed to address the grievances of ethnic communities regarding representation. All armed organisations – including the Tatmadaw – will need to discuss a roadmap to falling under the authority of elected civilians. Such a compact, though difficult to pull off, would give the country a chance at a brighter future.

The Tatmadaw needs to fully grasp the new paradigm of social resistance that is emerging under the new generation of activists. A rational consideration of possible outcomes should make clear that there are no long-term gains in continuing down the path set by the commander-in-chief. What's happened has happened, but as any good economist will tell you, there is a danger in chasing after sunk costs. It is time to come to the table.

In Nay Pyi Taw, the 600-acre Defense Services Museum has a glass display explaining the “affairs of 1988” from the perspective of the Tatmadaw, and why it was necessary for the army to step in. If, at some future time, the Tatmadaw were to dedicate a wall looking back on 2021, what would it say? How would its leaders justify this period in its history – for themselves, for their families, and their rank and file?

P.S.

- Frontier Myanmar. February 23, 2021:
<https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/why-the-coup-will-fail-and-what-the-tatmadaw-can-do-about-it/>
- Su Min Naing is the pseudonym of a scholar and analyst of international relations based in Myanmar.