

Myanmar: two years after the military seized power the country is mired in a bloody civil war - but there are grounds for optimism

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Myanmar's opposition parties and ethnic separatists have formed a united front against the military junta.

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Two years on from the latest [military coup](#) that deposed Myanmar's democratically elected government, what began as a wave of national protest against the army's power grab has descended into outright civil war.

Myanmar's military have gone beyond repression or terrorising ethnic minority groups - it is making war on society as a whole. There is little prospect of the violence ending, let alone the prosecution of the perpetrators for a [litany of crimes](#) against their people.

Meanwhile the junta continues to steal what wealth there is in Myanmar. This UN-designated "least developed country" is [vastly endowed](#) with natural resources which are being misappropriated. There is a major humanitarian and growing environmental crisis. Yet outside of the country, the situation's complexities are barely grasped.

Myanmar's 2020 election delivered a [crushing defeat](#) to the Union Solidarity and Development Party - the proxy political party of the Tatmadaw (Myanmar's military) - and a huge mandate to Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy and allied parties.

Yet on the morning of February 1 2021, army general Min Aung Hlaing blocked access to parliament, arrested Aung San Suu Kyi and many senior colleagues. He declared a "state of emergency" and [installed himself](#) as head of a ruling state administration council.

Millions took to the streets. A civil disobedience movement formed, led mainly by young people who saw their bright futures being stolen. The military reaction was [swift and brutal](#): demonstrators shot by snipers, bombed indiscriminately, arrested, tortured and executed.

Two years on, Aung San Suu Kyi, as well as most of her top party colleagues, remain in custody - she was [recently sentenced](#) to 33 years jail for "corruption". But several democratically elected leaders managed to escape to form a "[national unity government](#)" in exile. This government now represents Myanmar at the United Nations and has representatives in a range of countries.

Fightback

Meanwhile, across Myanmar ordinary people have taken up arms. Many have received basic training from one or another of the [ethnic armed organisations](#) which formed over decades of regional conflicts, and have returned to fight as the [People's Defence Force](#).

The whole of Myanmar is now a conflict zone. The Tatmadaw [routinely attacks or bombs villages](#) resisting or suspected of harbouring People's Defence Force members. Thousands have died and many more have been injured.

Thanks to significant [revenues from oil and gas](#), the Tatmadaw has the military advantage, particularly in [air power](#), yet it is struggling in the face of unified opposition. It lacks numerical superiority compared to the democrats, and many soldiers and police have defected - [over 8,000 so far](#).

Meanwhile it is finding it hard to recruit or even conscript new troops, risking becoming in the long term an "[army without soldiers](#)". It is also struggling to pay wages and is resorting to printing money, which is fuelling inflation that feeds into public discontent.

But two years of fighting has left Myanmar's resistance outgunned, with dwindling supplies, particularly ammunition, and little defence against air attacks. Conflict fatigue is affecting some.

Environmental disaster

It is a major humanitarian crisis. Over half the country is in poverty after the previous decade of rapid improvements under a civilian quasi-democracy. The UN has [identified 4.5 million people](#) needing emergency support, with millions displaced, the economy and international trade disrupted, and basic foodstuffs and essential drugs scarce.

But the conflict is delivering plenty of business opportunities for the Tatmadaw and its political cronies. Numerous large-scale projects previously blocked for environmental reasons [have been reactivated](#): new dams and mines are of particular concern.

Logging appears to be [on the increase](#) and a new wave of "crony" land grabbing by the army and its business partners has been taking over farmland for agricultural commodity production, often adding to deforestation.

Unregulated mining, taking advantage of Myanmar's significant share of gold, gems, jade and rare earth elements, is poisoning Myanmar's waterways. Oxford University-led research in 2017 into water quality [found arsenic and lead concentrations](#) above safe levels. And today, mining projects [are proliferating](#), undoubtedly increasing pollution.

Meanwhile in many cities, [electricity outages](#) is forcing people to burn coal and wood for fuel, affecting air quality.

Grounds for optimism

Aside from the solidarity in the resistance movement and the increasingly fragile position of the military, there are grounds for optimism in the robust response of many foreign governments. The UN security council [issued a resolution in December 2022](#) calling for an immediate cessation to all

forms of violence (Russia, China and India abstained).

The US has [imposed escalating sanctions](#) targeting generals, arms suppliers and cronies. In December 2022, the [National Defense Authorization Act](#) provided support for democratic groups in Myanmar, including training and non-lethal assistance.

The EU passed its [fifth package of sanctions](#) against the junta in November 2022, targeting arms exports. This international pressure has increased to the extent where it appears even China is [becoming embarrassed](#) by its association with the junta.

The civil war will undoubtedly continue for some time, and when it eventually ends the scars will take even longer to heal. What would make the pain bearable for many would be a just peace in which the menace of the Tatmadaw, after more than 60 years of violence, is removed, and the wealth of the generals, their cronies and the military companies used to alleviate poverty.

In the absence of direct military assistance, foreign governments and organisations should consider supporting the national unity government to help alleviate the suffering of Myanmar's people. Key to this will be the coordination of health, education and financial services - now widely absent - as well as the groundwork to help civil society to restore democracy when the time comes.

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P.S.

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Oliver's primary research interest is the political economy / political ecology of forest governance reform in developing countries. He mainly focuses on issues of: 1) democratisation, policy and reform rights reform and the associated political empowerment of forest users, 2) livelihood development and poverty alleviation at the forest - agricultural interface, and 3) integrated biodiversity management in forest management.

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