

Myanmar's Military Takeover Falters

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Global news headlines this month will be focused on the one-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which falls on Feb. 24. This external aggression, where a bigger state unilaterally takes territory from a smaller neighbor by force, can be juxtaposed with an internal subjugation in Myanmar, where a military coup took place two years ago this week. Whether the aggression is externally between states, or internally within a state, the oppressors behave the same way and pursue similar objectives of conquest and dominance. Reversing an internal subjugation is as morally compelling as turning back an external aggression. What Myanmar's civilian-led resistance coalition needs is a fraction of the aid the Ukrainians have been receiving.

When Myanmar's military (also known as the Tatmadaw), led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing, staged the putsch, few could have imagined that the civilian resistance would be so fierce, determined, and adaptive. Most thought that the Myanmar military would succeed with its coup in 2021, just as it had in the past, whether in 1962 or 1988. Thailand's two coups in 2006 and 2014 were further evidence that military takeovers are a routine undertaking for power-hungry generals when they see fit.

But the Tatmadaw's seizure of power this time has failed to consolidate territory and govern the populace over the past two years. In response to the military takeover, a nationwide anti-coup uprising immediately sprang up and organized around elected representatives from the November 2020 election and the civilian-led National Unity Government (NUG) [1], eventually including makeshift militias of villagers and urban youths that formed into ubiquitous People's Defense Forces (PDFs) in alliance with the ethnic resistance organizations (EROs) around the country.

No one saw it coming—that the NUG, together with the subsequent National Unity Consultative Committee, would gain traction and become a viable civilian-elected government that is winning growing international support and recognition. That a battle-hardened Tatmadaw would prove unable to subdue combat resistance and consolidate power against ethnic armies and a bunch of ragtag militias using guerrilla tactics was unanticipated.

Thus a full-blooded civil war and stalemate are occurring in Myanmar today. Neither side can resolutely prevail. An estimated half of the country is under the opposition alliance's control, gaining more ground and inflicting more casualties daily against security forces. Yet the Tatmadaw has arms, armor and air power to continue fighting indefinitely, partly because it makes enough income from selling Myanmar's lucrative natural resources. While the NUG, PDFs, EROs, and other domestic columns in the anti-coup coalition have the commitment, resolve, willpower, and growing material support to resist subjugation to the end, the junta under the State Administration Council is hunkered down for the long haul.

As a result of the military's violent clampdown on the civilian-led uprising, thousands have been

killed amid media reports of wanton maiming, looting, torture and rape. According to the United Nations, almost 20,000 civilians have been arrested without due process, while more than 1.5 million have been displaced from their homes. The worsening humanitarian crisis has brought Myanmar back to its darkest days of dictatorship.

Under these desperate circumstances, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been impotent in promoting peaceful dialogue and is in danger of passive complicity with the Tatmadaw's atrocious crimes against its own people. Myanmar has taken ASEAN for a ride in pursuit of legitimacy, and ASEAN is allowing it to happen. To be sure, ASEAN is divided over what to do about Myanmar's coup. Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Singapore have called for the restoration of the democratic process, but the rest have acquiesced to what they see as a fait accompli in favor of Snr-Gen Min Aung Hlaing.

Much of what can be done about Myanmar, let alone ASEAN's overall credibility, is riding on Indonesia's chairmanship this year. Indonesian President Joko Widodo, at the end of a decade in top office, is likely to want to leave a lasting foreign policy legacy, particularly the recovery of ASEAN centrality and cohesion. But as long as the SAC maintains its intransigence and rides roughshod over ASEAN's recommendations, such as the Five-Point Consensus from April 2021, the grouping will probably remain ineffectual in brokering peace and dialogue amid Myanmar's civil war.

The international community, from the US and the European Union to the United Nations, has imposed sanctions and issued repeated condemnations. But China has backed the junta, and Russia has been a major arms supplier to Myanmar's illegitimate rulers. What pro-democracy supporters can do from outside is to pre-empt the junta's whitewashing program, including a plan to hold an election in the near future. A poll under these coup circumstances in the middle of a civil war the junta is losing would be a bogus exercise designed to give the generals a semblance of legitimacy and control. ASEAN should also be mindful of this prospect and avoid rubber-stamping the SAC's sham election.

A longer-term security concern for the Myanmar people and for the region is the potential breakup of the country into statelets and separate and semi-autonomous entities. If the Tatmadaw loses more ground and somehow shows signs of collapse, perhaps from key battlefield defeats and defections, there will be an urgent need to hold the Union of Myanmar together and away from disintegration and "balkanization", a scenario to be avoided by the NUG and NUCC. It behoves the domestic supporters and the international community to ensure Myanmar's territorial and political cohesion stay intact because a breakup would be disastrous for the neighborhood and a source of instability more broadly.

As the battlefield balance will determine the civil war and the fate of the country, the armed opposition needs defensive weapons from like-minded supporters from abroad, particularly portable anti-aircraft capability to neutralize air strikes.

The vast majority of the Myanmar people are putting their lives on the line to take back a future stolen from them by a heinous regime bent on keeping power and entrenching its vested interests.

The people of Myanmar deserve a second chance at reopening and seeing a new light at the end of another dark tunnel. Having played a critical role in Myanmar's reopening in 2011-21 that gave rise to a new generation with rising expectations for a better future, the international community must not shirk its obligation to see Myanmar through another transition to better days.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] The NUG was not formed until April 16, 2021. The immediate call to resist the coup was made by the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) on the one hand, and the National League for Democracy on the other. The CDM was not led by the LND. Note from ESSF.