

The rebels who will and won't fight Myanmar's coup

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Karen and Kachin rebels have launched attacks but other ethnic armed groups are lying in wait or even quietly collaborating with the coup makers

Myanmar's multi-sided civil war, now more clearly than ever a war waged by the military against all segments and ethnicities of society, saw its bloodiest day on March 27's Armed Forces Day.

Notably absent to this theater of the absurd were senior officials from Myanmar's ethnic armed organizations (EAO), who boycotted the event and have issued stern statements of opposition to the February 1 coup and the new State Administration Council's (SAC) murderous rule.

Many are now calling on the nation's various EAOs to escalate their attacks against the military, or Tatmadaw, and alleviate pressure on and express solidarity with the many unarmed urban opponents of the coup.

But EAO responses have been decidedly mixed and encompass three broad typologies: rhetoric and armed action, words with little action, and silence and inaction.

Two months after the coup, many now wonder where are the various insurgents who have long claimed the Tatmadaw as public enemy number one, and why are they not acting in concert at this clear moment of military vulnerability?

The clearest opponent to the SAC is the venerable Karen National Union (KNU), which was first founded in 1947 and first launched its armed campaign against the government in 1949.

The day before Armed Forces Day, a KNU statement signed by chairman General Saw Mutu Say Poe listed eight broad demands, including an end to violence against protestors, release of all political prisoners, an immediate ceasefire and observance of provision of the now lifeless 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), agreement to address the root causes of internal conflict of over 70 years through negotiations, and, crucially, the "Tatmadaw should publicly declare its commitment to democracy and federalism and withdraw from active engagement in politics."

The KNU statement has resonated. By the end of March 26, reporting on it by Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) hit more than 137,000 views on its Facebook page and was shared more than 30,000 times. Radio Free Asia (RFA) Myanmar Service's reporting on the statement garnered 121,000 views and 17,000 shares.

More dramatically, the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) overran a key Tatmadaw outpost near the Salween River, taking several prisoners of war and reportedly killing ten soldiers including a senior officer. It was a symbolic shot to Senior General Min Aung Hlaing on his big day.

The SAC's propaganda 'information sheet' the following day blamed the attack on KNLA vice-chair

General Baw Kyaw Heh's "narrow minded ethno-nationalism." But the base attack comes after nearly three years of Tatmadaw expansion into the area and systematic attacks on civilians.

The Tatmadaw's reprisal was swift. That night a series of airstrikes in Brigade 5 headquarters at Day Bu Noh in Hpapun Township inflicted a number of casualties.

The airstrikes were alarming not just for how rare they have been in Myanmar's southeastern region conflict zones, but also for their relative accuracy. The Karen Peace Support Network (KPSN) claimed two jets dropped nine bombs and strafed the area with cannon fire, killing three civilians and wounding seven.

Airstrikes continued for the next two days, driving an estimated 2,000 civilians, including many from the long-established internally displaced camp at Ei Htu Hta, crossed into Thailand, only to be pushed back by Thai military forces.

An estimated 10,000 civilians have already been displaced in the area. This follows years of incremental assaults against the Karen in Kayin state and a gradual troop buildup to secure a long-planned road project connecting to Thailand.

Further north, the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) is expanding attacks against the Tatmadaw in several key locations across Kachin state and northern Shan state with an intensity not seen since 2013.

The KIA continues to storm and seize Tatmadaw bases that house helicopter gunships that have been used against Kachin forces. On March 25, the KIA seized the Tatmadaw base of Alaw Bum near their headquarters at Laiza, which they lost to the Tatmadaw over 20 years ago. On March 28, KIA forces overran four Myanmar police bases in Hpakant and reportedly killed 20 personnel.

The KIA has also threatened retaliation in urban areas if Tatmadaw attacks on civilians continue. Violence against protesters in Myitkyina, Mohnyein, and Hpakant has resulted in several deaths and multiple injuries, consistent with the random and extreme violence seen throughout Myanmar since the coup.

In response, many camp leaders of the estimated 95,000 IDPs in Kachin state have instructed communities to dig air raid shelters in expectation of an intensified conflict.

But where are all the other EAOs?

Two of the smallest signatories to the NCA sent officials to the Armed Forces Day, namely the KNU/KNLA Peace Council (a small KNU splinter group formed in 2007) and the Arakan Liberation Party (ALP), which has been eclipsed by the more aggressive and popular Arakan Army (AA). Many other NCA signatories have been silent.

The "all talk and no action" typology is the favored approach of the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS), one of the largest NCA signatories. RCSS chairman Yawd Serk presents a statesman-like resolve and has burnished his image with a series of interviews to Western media outlets on March 27.

In one, the long-time rebel said, "If they (Tatmadaw) continue to shoot at protesters and bully the people, I think all the ethnic groups would not just stand by and do nothing... The ethnic armed groups now have a similar enemy and we need to join hands and hurt those that are hurting the people. We need to join together."

These are strong sentiments, consistent with the RCSS's defiant statements over the past two months, but they are so far simply words. The RCSS has made no discernable military move against the Tatmadaw since the coup, although long-standing patterns of firefights have persisted.

In fact, fighting between the RCSS and EAO rivals such as the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA) has risen since the coup: the TNLA killed 18 RCSS soldiers in February, according to reports.

The RCSS's aggressive expansion into northern Shan state after signing the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in 2015, widely suspected as facilitated in part by the Tatmadaw, reignited a multi-sided war between ethnic Ta'ang, Shan and Kachin forces.

Yord Serk, far from "joining hands" with other EAOs, is seeking greater control of territory and resources at his rivals' expense. When the RCSS actually takes the fight to the Tatmadaw, similar to the assaults launched by the KNU and KIA, then perhaps the wily warlord's rhetoric can be believed.

But it's more likely that Yord Serk is prevaricating, waiting to see which side will prevail so he can cut a deal with them.

The "strongly silent" EAOs include the United Wa State Army (UWSA), the nation's largest armed militia which is firmly under the leash of the Chinese and unlikely to play any part in the conflict. That's crucial considering the UWSA's role in supplying other EAOs with arms often procured from China.

Among the curiously quiet is the Arakan Army, who, despite a rise in evident opposition to the coup by Rakhine state's civil society and even some local political parties, has only recently opposed the coup.

Reuters coaxed some words from AA spokesperson Khine Thu Ka, who said in a message, "It is a great sadness that innocent people are being shot and killed all over Myanmar... the oppressed ethnic people as a whole will continue to fight for their freedom from oppression."

But this fell far short of the AA expressing clear opposition to the coup, with a misleading headline claiming: "Rebel militia...joins other minorities in condemning junta." The AA mouthpiece's anodyne sentiments are more akin to clichéd United Nations missives than the fighting words of arguably Myanmar's most effective insurgent group in recent years.

The AA's two months of silence following the coup and three months of silence after the November elections clearly indicates the rebel group is willing to ignore the nation's wider suffering to secure a deal of conditional autonomy with the Tatmadaw for parts of Rakhine state.

This could amount to the gravest political miscalculation of the post-coup period if the AA is tacitly siding with the Tatmadaw at a moment it is badly overstretched cracking down on urban protesters and other EAOs.

On March 30, the Three Brotherhood Alliance, comprised of the AA, TNLA, and ethnic Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDA), issued a vaguely worded statement claiming that unless the SAC addresses the people's demands, the alliance would "support and cooperate with our oppressed brethren and multiethnic people who are waging the Myanmar Spring Revolution in self-defense."

If these three groups actually moved to escalate their attacks on the Tatmadaw, rather than their local opponents, the alliance would both make a significant impact on the military's troop

deployments and send a powerful signal of solidarity with the urban-based Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM).

But calls for an EAO alliance to collaborate with urban protestors is as much of a chimera as the military's previously promoted "nationwide" peace process.

The resistance of the Karen and Kachin, and the burden being borne by multiethnic communities in those areas as growing numbers seek shelter along the borderlands, should serve as a rebuke to the cynical indifference of other EAOs who have long espoused their opposition to Tatmadaw rule.

At a time that calls for clearly worded and demonstrated sentiments and positions - both in actions and words - some EAOs have instead sought accommodation with the Tatmadaw, which should be seen clearly for what it is: collaboration with the enemy.

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