

While Myanmar's cities become military occupations, conflict persists in the ethnic borderlands

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A Myanmar Commentary by Naw Hsa Moo & Dominique Dillabough-Lefebvre.

Following the February coup, the violence used by the security forces against civilian protestors in Myanmar's towns and cities has shocked public opinion around the world. But, as Naw Hsa Moo and Dominique Dillabough-Lefebvre explain in this commentary, such tactics have long been used by the Myanmar armed forces in military operations in the country's ethnic states and regions. Awareness is now building and, as they argue, the military coup has brought new understanding and sympathy between pro-democracy and ethnic nationality movements.

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Villagers in Mutraw District, Karen State, protest on the Salween River against military occupation / Photo credit Jittrapon Kaicome

Since the seizure of power by the military State Administration Council (SAC) on 1 February, mass protests have swept towns and cities in every state and region in Myanmar. As the days have passed by, civilians have faced the brunt of an increasingly aggressive response from the national armed forces, known as the Tatmadaw, whose indiscriminate use of force has now led to over 70 killed, countless injured, and more than 2000 people detained. And yet, despite the heightened use of military force, the general public throughout the country continue to stand in defiance, leading creative protests, with people of diverse ethnicities and backgrounds joining strikes and the civil disobedience movement.

All nationality peoples are being impacted. For lowland Bamar (Burman) people, the majority ethnic group, the current repression against civilians carries terrifying reverberations of past violent state-led responses towards demonstrators, most notably during the 1988 pro-democracy protests. However, for those living in many non-Bamar areas, the militarisation and pervasive sense of fear accompanying current events are sadly all too familiar. For many decades, they have been regular

features of daily life, notably in the Kachin, Karen, Kayah (Karenni), Mon, Rakhine (Arakan) and Shan States.

Karen State in Myanmar's Southeast is a poignant example of such struggles. Home to what is often considered the world's longest-running civil war, conflict has escalated between the Tatmadaw and the armed opposition Karen National Union (KNU), with over 6,000 civilians displaced from their villages since the Tatmadaw intensified military operations in December 2020. The majority people living here identify as Karen, one of the country's largest nationality groups, and are largely farming communities living in forested hills and winding valleys that run down the Thailand border. In response to the twin threats of military incursions and the SAC coup, villagers across Kler Lwee Htu (Nyaunglebin) and Mutraw (Hpapun) Districts have been regularly demonstrating, demanding the removal of the Tatmadaw from their lands and expressing solidarity with the protest movement across the country.

Whether in conditions of war or peace, Karen communities have faced the same challenges in every era of government since the country's independence in 1948. A ceasefire was agreed between the government and the KNU in 2012 but, to date, this has not brought about a significant reduction in militarisation in many areas. Rather, the patterns of conflict and Tatmadaw encroachment have continued. In particular, the recent increase in Tatmadaw activity is linked to road-building, the expansion of a network of military roads in northern Karen State that first began during offensives in the 1990s.

The detrimental consequences for local villagers are profound. Naw Ghay Hai is the principal of Keh Der school in Kler Lwee Htu District in the KNU 3rd Brigade area. But, as she explained, there is no benefit to the local population: only an increase in land loss and fear:

"The road being built crosses through the paddy fields of local farmers, destroying the irrigation systems in the fields, seriously affecting the livelihoods of local people. They [Tatmadaw troops] build camps nearby that are causing the displacement of local villagers, and they are shelling around nearby villages. When local people hear the sound of guns and mortars, they obviously flee out of fear, and don't dare to return."

The latest military incursions are now compounding a worsening pattern of land loss and displacement that has built up among the local population over several decades. According to the Committee for Internally Displaced Karen People, approximately 30,000 people have been displaced in the local area since Tatmadaw "regional clearance" operations were initiated in the 1990s. Military offensives and continuing clashes have caused a loss of shelter, a lack of access to healthcare and difficulties in delivering food supplies to displaced villagers, putting children and elderly people especially at risk. Displaced villagers now live scattered in different locations in several townships across northern Karen State.

For many communities, this is not their first experience of flight. Villagers in Keh Der village tract recently explained to staff members from KESAN, a Karen civil society organisation, that they had started to hear the distant sound of gunshots and shelling from 12 December last year. Although this initially appeared to be occurring some way from their village, everyone was worried. Then, on 11 February – ten days after the coup, Tatmadaw forces moved closer to the village and people started to flee. As the troops moved in, they destroyed the food stores of displaced farmers, seized their livestock, burnt down their houses and, in nearby areas, forced villagers to act as porters to carry supplies for them as they continued their military sweep.

For the local peoples, this latest displacement brought back many memories of sufferings in the past. Constant insecurity and the arbitrary use of force have long been a mainstay in the lives of

local people in this region. Saw Lo Wah, head of Keh Der village tract, remembered first fleeing from the Tatmadaw as a child in the 1960s. Those who were captured were forced by the soldiers to work as porters, an especially pervasive and egregious abuse of human rights. As he explained:

“Many people were injured or killed when they worked as porters for the military. For example, my father stepped on a landmine when he was a porter for the Tatmadaw. This was the case for many people as the Tatmadaw used Karen villagers to sweep the area for landmines, usually at gunpoint.”

Such experiences continued into adulthood, with Saw Lo Wah describing the situation as having grown “increasingly worse” during the late 1990s:

“When the military came, one family had to flee so quickly that they were unable to take their two children from their home, and the Burmese military burnt down their house. When the family returned, the children were gone.”

This was by no means the end of local suffering. For his part, Saw Lo Wah had to build his own home on three subsequent occasions, but each time Tatmadaw troops burned it down again, with all of his family’s possessions inside.

After six decades of military-dominated rule and a new regime in power, Saw Lo Wah’s assessment is stark. But he is expressing a view of the latest military takeover that can be frequently heard among communities in different parts of the country today:

“This is the root cause of our poverty. The Tatmadaw doesn’t care if you are young or old, male or female, they will kill everybody. They spare nobody.”



KNU soldiers accompany villagers in the forest during a time of increased Tatmadaw attacks in northern Karen State / Photo credit Jittrapon Kaicome

A backdrop of conflict: militarisation as a way of life

Internal military conflicts have long been central to the nation-building ambitions of the Tatmadaw in Myanmar. In a country where national identity has long been linked to a particularly “racialised” vision of ethnicity, the national armed forces have been engaged in protracted warfare with a wide range of ethnic armed organisations (EAOs), amongst them the KNU, since independence from Great Britain in 1948. During these years, a simplistic vision of national politics has often pervaded popular imagination and discourse. In recent decades, this vision has been marked by the country’s democratic hero, Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, and her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), who – it was hoped – were gradually leading the country on a path away from state failure and international isolationism towards democratisation and respect for human rights.

These expectations reached a pinnacle when the NLD won the 2015 general election, assuming government office the following year. Yet amidst the period of economic liberalisation that followed the 2011 shift to a nominally civilian system of government, armed conflicts have persisted in ethnic

nationality areas outside of the Bamar-dominated heartlands in the centre of the country. While the army's blood-stained campaign against the Rohingya population in 2017 was the subject of much international media coverage, the Tatmadaw has also continued to carry out "anti-insurgency" campaigns against EAOs among several other nationality groups, including the Buddhist Rakhine people who also hail from Rakhine State. The cycles of conflict within the country are yet to be ended.

Many nationality peoples have been affected. Following the expulsion of over 750,000 Rohingya people, the Tatmadaw became locked in an increasingly bloody conflict with an emergent Rakhine force known as the United League of Army-Arakan Army (ULA-AA). But, after the NLD's accession to office, the Tatmadaw also escalated military "clearance operations" forcibly displacing local populations in the Kachin, Karen and Shan States as well, severely impacting on the security and livelihoods of farming communities who depend on land for their survival.

Accurate humanitarian statistics are difficult to assemble from different parts of the country. But up to 10,000 people are believed to have died during Tatmadaw operations in the past five years, while over a million civilians are currently displaced from their homes, either living as refugees in neighbouring countries or in displacement camps in the hills. The evidence of a pervasive culture of human rights violations is deeply troubling. Today Tatmadaw actions during the events of the past few years are the focus of ongoing human rights investigations for potential war crimes by the International Criminal Court, International Court of Justice and UN Independent Investigative Mechanism for Myanmar.

Finding a political language, though, that unites peoples and addresses the conflict challenges in inclusive ways has historically proven difficult. Distinctions between "state" and "non-state" actors have often been opaque within the geographic boundaries of Myanmar. Shifting alliances between the Tatmadaw, ethnic nationality forces, government-backed militias and local military strongmen have been one of the most persistent realities in defining the functioning of "State" in many parts of the country. Today over 20 EAOs remain active in different nationality lands, from Rakhine State on the Bay of Bengal to the Tanintharyi Region in Myanmar's far south.

In this context, projections of national unity become a reflection of the complex relationship between the Tatmadaw at the political centre and the peripheries where diverse nationality peoples live in uplands surrounding the Ayeyarwady plains. Over the decades, continued exploitation of the wealth of the resource-rich borderlands has been central to the development of Myanmar state, much in the same way that the plunder of native lands, slavery and a western expansionism was central in the shaping of the American national imaginary. Much of this economy is secretive and under-reported, but Myanmar's ethnic states are home to large mineral reserves, illicit drug production and lucrative cross-border trades from which powerful elites and outside interests – not local peoples – mostly profit.

Compounding the marginalisation of local peoples, there is often a large knowledge gap in the outside world about the harsh living conditions in the country's conflict zones. Such a lack of understanding is a constant source of frustration for ethnic nationality peoples trying to make common cause with their fellow countryman, yet find themselves stymied by urban-rural differences as well as ethnic, religious and linguistic divides. Even many well-informed urban Burmese only have a limited grasp of what is happening in the hills. The same lack of awareness exists in the international community, where the confusing array of armed groups poses significant barriers for foreign journalists, policy-makers and other outside actors who seek to understand some of the longest-running conflicts in modern Asian history.

For this reason, the failure of Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD leadership to address conflict and the

grievances of non-Bamar peoples remains one of the party's most notable failures during its time in government office. The 2015 Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA), which the NLD-led administration inherited from its quasi-civilian predecessor, was a cornerstone in a faltering peace process that not only failed to include a majority of the strongest EAOs in the country but was also one in which the none of three words in its title could be said to be true: i.e. it was not nationwide, a ceasefire or an agreement.

To try and pick up the political momentum, the NLD inaugurated a 21st Century Panglong Conference in August 2016 with a promise to re-energise the peace process. But the government never acknowledged the NCA's many failings. The NCA's largest signatories in terms of EAO combatants – the KNU and Restoration Council of Shan State – could hardly be seen to be representative of the entire country and both continued to clash with the Tatmadaw. At the same time, most of the eight other EAOs that signed the NCA were significantly smaller, some of which had never seriously fought with the government while others, notably the Chin National Front, had not had protracted clashes with the Tatmadaw since the early 1990s.

Equally damaging to the credibility of the NCA, there were powerful and well-organised EAOs in the north of the country that were either not allowed by the Tatmadaw to join the accord or decided to boycott the process altogether. Pre-eminent EAOs which never joined the NCA include the United Wa State Party and Shan State Progress Party which have formal ceasefires with the government, and the Kachin Independence Organisation, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and ULA-AA that do not.

The ethno-political landscape is now highly uncertain. Following the coup, the NCA EAO-signatories collectively issued a statement on 20 February refusing to recognise the new regime as a legitimate power, and leading to a cessation of further talks. This represents a de facto breakdown in a ceasefire which, since its inception, had given little assurances to NCA signatories that the Myanmar armed forces would hold true to their word. For ceasefire EAOs, this represents a dilemma. According to Lt-Col. Saw La Shwe Hai from the KNU's armed wing, Tatmadaw officers claim to follow the NCA codes of conduct and that they will try to resolve issues through political dialogue, but they do not follow through in practice:

“Instead they try and control more territory, build roads and further infrastructure and keep sending more reinforcements... They are trying to gradually control our area, bit by bit, but pretend they are following agreements... they couldn't be lying any more”.

For ethnic nationality communities in the conflict-zones, such experiences are hardly new. But there is evidence that the scale of human rights violations across the country since the SAC's seizure of power is bringing about a change in attitudes among the Bamar-majority population as well. Amidst the protests in the cities, incidents are being documented that the Myanmar military has been looting shops and houses, stealing food from street vendors and taking livestock from markets. Understanding the reality of such violence from the perspective of those living in the ethnic states and borderlands sheds light on the nature of the ethnocratic state-building policies of governments since independence and the ideology of the Tatmadaw.

Echoing this, a vocal minority of Bamar people have begun apologising for failing to stand behind ethnic peoples as they faced persecution. A female activist, who asked to remain anonymous, explained that “the intimidation, harassment and violence by the police and soldiers are nothing new” but that the “the violence and oppression has now been extended to the cities”. She continued:

“We are not even experiencing the brutality of the military yet in the cities, like those people in Rakhine experienced every day and every night. Those in Kachin. Those in Karen. Those in Shan.

Now we too have to defend ourselves.”



Young Karen women in Luthaw Township demonstrating against military road-building close to where environmental activist Saw Oo Mu was shot dead by Tatmadaw troops in 2018 / Photo credit Jittrapon Kaicome

Conclusion

As the military coup enters its second month, people across the country are increasingly faced with the striking parallels between the ongoing indiscriminate use of force, intimidation and suppression against anti-coup protestors and civilians in the towns and the military's historical and ongoing systematic brutality in Myanmar's ethnically diverse borderlands. For populations in these areas, this has long been part of their lived experience. But for many young Bamar people in the cities, a growing awareness of this offers important lessons for a country coming to grips with the reinstatement of a military dictatorship amidst longstanding ethnic strife.

Such sentiments are not only rising in urban areas. Much of Myanmar's largely rural population have also long faced the brunt of military-enabled land confiscations and repressive practices, keeping the majority of the population in poverty. As journalist and author Carlos Sardiña Galache succinctly put it:

“The Tatmadaw has always portrayed itself as the only institution capable of preserving Burma's unity, and this coup is proving the point in an unintended way: virtually the whole country seems to be united in rejecting the coup and the Tatmadaw itself.”

Now that these diverse groups are coming together, new alliances are beginning to emerge amidst the chaos. Although Myanmar's future remains far from certain, the coup has created circumstances through which people in towns and cities across the country can better empathise with the long-suffering plight of residents of the war-torn lands inhabited by the Karens and other ethnic nationality peoples.

Naw Hsa Moo & Dominique Dillabough-Lefebvre

Written in collaboration with members of the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) conducting on the ground interviews.

P.S.

• TNI. Programmes: Myanmar in Focus. 12 March 2021:
<https://www.tni.org/en/article/while-myanmars-cities-become-military-occupations-conflict-persists-in>

[-the-ethnic](#)