

Revolution and counter-revolution in Myanmar

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Counter-revolutionary violence has reached new heights in Myanmar, as the Tatmadaw (the country's military) attempts to terrorise a nationwide uprising into submission. Beginning with the Battle of Hlaing Tharyar—a four-day showdown of workers and students against the armed forces in March, which claimed the lives of at least 60 demonstrators in a working-class district of Yangon, Myanmar's largest city—the terror has continued, producing new massacres as the anti-coup movement continues to paralyse the economy with strikes in most key sectors and resists the junta by whatever means necessary.

In late March, during Armed Forces Day celebrations, which commemorate the beginning of the military's resistance to Japanese occupation in 1945, the Tatmadaw—accompanied by representatives from Russia, China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Laos and Thailand—paraded through the streets of Naypyidaw, the capital. Meanwhile, demonstrations in major cities and regional centres across the country were gunned down by police and security forces. (The official death toll that day was 114, but the real figure is likely higher.) According to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, more than 4,000 people have been arrested and more than 700 killed since resistance to the coup began on 1 February.

The street fighting and barricades that characterised Yangon throughout most of March have been replaced by military checkpoints and patrols. Internet and telecommunications services have become highly restricted. Meanwhile, regular broadcasts on the military-controlled television network, MRTV, show the names and faces of those with arrest warrants, urging citizens to inform the military of their whereabouts. (On 9 April, MRTV announced that nineteen residents from North Oakkalapa township in Yangon had been sentenced to death.)

"The streets have been turned into killing fields. There have been random shootings in neighbourhoods, including children as young as five; workers have been gunned down inside [their] factories; arson and raids on our homes; mass imprisonment; funerals attacked by soldiers; [the military] are even burning protesters alive", Me Me Myint,* a nurse from Yangon Workers' Hospital, says over the phone from a Buddhist monastery somewhere on the outskirts of the city. Me Me and hundreds of other workers from the hospital were evicted from their state-provided housing in early April for participating in the anti-coup movement. In the background, Buddhist monks can be heard chanting the "Mora Sutta" (the peacock's prayer for protection from evil spirits). But prayers mean little to the Tatmadaw, which has been raiding monasteries and hospitals almost daily, kidnapping injured protesters, before torturing many to death. "Nowhere is safe from this evil", Me Me says.

Despite the terror, the movement to topple the junta continues to find ways to resist. Flash demonstrations—relatively short, mobile actions (often on motorbikes or scooters) of varying sizes that are hard for the security forces to repress—have become prominent in major cities and towns. Myanmar's New Year celebration, the Thingyan festival, was boycotted in April under the slogan, "We shall not be governed". Throughout Yangon, photographs show a prominent slogan on political posters and graffiti directed at the Tatmadaw and dalans (informants): "Your turn is coming. Be prepared to repay the blood debt".

University students have been boycotting the higher education system, calling on staff to join the anti-coup movement. "Our education system supports fascism. It must be resisted by whatever means necessary", James,* a student activist and Marxist, says over the phone from Yangon. James has been on the run from the Tatmadaw since early April, after he and other student activists and trade union leaders were issued arrest warrants on the charge of inciting mutiny in the armed forces. He now resides in a network of safe houses, established by supporters of the movement, which thousands now use to evade arrest. "In reality, the arrest warrants are death sentences", he says. "If the Tatmadaw finds me, they will almost certainly kill me. But before they do that, they will imprison and torture me. They will try to force me to give up the location of my comrades, and the details of our networks. But they can terrorise us until the end of the world—we will never submit to fascism."

Across the major cities, the indefinite general strike continues. But it has lost much of the momentum that characterised earlier weeks of the struggle. "The repression makes it almost impossible for workers to meet in public or demonstrate", Z,* a professional staff member at a bank in Yangon and a supporter of the strike movement, says via Signal. But she also says that the banks are still paralysed, explaining that fewer than a quarter of bank staff across the country have returned to work under the threat of mass sackings, arrests and housing evictions. "Money cannot be moved around like normal. The shipyards are at a standstill; trucking and logistics as well. The train drivers will not go back to work and the military does not know how to operate [the trains]", she says.

While core sections of the strike movement hold out, others reportedly are being forced back. "The most impoverished workers, such as day labourers, have little choice to go back to work. They do not want to work under the junta, but they do not have the same support networks as some of the better organised workers", Z says.

Despite the general strike, the state coffers continue to be filled by sectors that have yet to be affected by the movement: extractive industries, such as oil, gas, rare gem mining and illegal logging, as well as the Tatmadaw-controlled organised crime networks, which include exotic wildlife trading and narcotics production. (According to the Financial Times, jade mining operations alone generate an estimated \$US31 billion in revenue each year.)

Throughout April, regional cities and rural centres have become a key site of confrontation between the movement and the Tatmadaw. These areas have attempted to draw the armed forces out of the major cities and spread their resources thin. Across the Mandalay region, several townships and smaller cities mobilised under the slogan: "We are scared, but the demonstrations must not end". And in Mandalay, the country's second largest city, students, workers and engineers have led a series of daily flash demonstrations. (Buddhist monks have been sighted marching at the front of mobilisations, in the hope that the armed forces will be more hesitant to carry out repression against religious figures.)

In the Sagaing and Magway regions, locals armed themselves with homemade hunting rifles and clashed repeatedly with regime forces. Despite being heavily outgunned and sustaining large casualties, locals reportedly ambushed military convoys in town after town, holding up their forces for several days. Dozens of soldiers and police were killed in the fighting, with many dozens more wounded. A prominent slogan raised throughout the confrontations proclaimed: "An attack on any town is an attack on our own!"

On 9 April, confrontations reached a high point in the city of Bago, northeast of Yangon, when hundreds of soldiers and police attacked residents who had erected barricades and established armed militias in the eastern parts of the city. During the assault, video footage shows soldiers

showering live ammunition and firing explosive munitions into the barricades—including rocket-propelled grenades and mortars—while residents attempt to defend themselves with homemade rifles.

By the end of the assault, the official death toll was recorded as 82 casualties (the worst day of violence in a single massacre since resistance to the coup began). But Thar Yar Than,* a member of a local militia, says over the phone that the real numbers are somewhere in the hundreds. “They piled up the dead bodies, loaded them into their trucks and drove them to their base”, he says. According to Thar Yar, dozens of the severely wounded were denied medical treatment by soldiers. Rescue workers were threatened with being shot if they intervened. The closest public hospital was also seized and occupied by soldiers and police.

“Injured people were piled up with the dead. You could hear their screams from [among] the corpses”, he says. Thousands of Bago residents, Thar Yar included, are now hiding in the surrounding forests to evade arrest. “People say that civil war is coming”, he says. “But for many, civil war has arrived.”

In recent weeks, many of the country’s ethnic armed organisations (EAOs) have ramped up attacks on police and military outposts. The Kachin Independence Army (KIA) soldiers have reportedly routed several police battalions in the northern borderlands near China. They also seized the Alaw Bum base, previously held by the Tatmadaw. (According to reports since then, the KIA has defended the base from Tatmadaw soldiers, killing more than 100, including their commanding officers, as well as capturing dozens of deserters in the aftermath of the fighting.)

The Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA) seized the Thee Mu Hta military base in Mutraw, in the south-east of Myanmar, and several other EAOs in the Shan and Rakhine regions have been providing armed protection for demonstrations. In an official statement, the KNLA said: “We cannot accept inhumane acts, not only in Kayin [Karen] state, but also in other areas”.

In retaliation, the Tatmadaw has launched airstrikes and shelled several ethnic-controlled areas. Dozens have been killed and tens of thousands have fled their homes. Most refugees are now stranded in camps for internally displaced people along the Thailand-Myanmar border. Many have reportedly tried fleeing into Thailand, only to be denied access or deported by Thai authorities (who have also repeatedly blocked medical and food supplies into Myanmar). The tens of thousands of internally displaced are now building bunkers in the camps in case the Tatmadaw launches an all-out bombing campaign throughout the territories.

But the increasing reliance on airstrikes masks signs of weakness that have emerged within the Tatmadaw. In recent weeks, a small number of middle-ranking officers have defected into EAO territory and expressed their support for the revolution. In an interview with news site Myanmar-Now.org, one of the defectors, Captain Lin Htet Aung, says that the families of soldiers are being threatened with torture and murder in retaliation for insubordination. According to Captain Aung, up to 75 percent of troops would leave the military if their families were to receive protection.

To consolidate a new state machine in Myanmar in the event that the Tatmadaw is overthrown, as well as to gain the support of the EAOs and ward off threats from striking workers, the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH)—a group of parliamentarians largely drawn from the National League for Democracy (NLD), which was ousted in the 1 February coup—have announced a National Unity Government (NUG).

The NUG has published a charter to rewrite the country’s constitution, which will allegedly enshrine rights for all ethnic minorities and establish a Federal Union Army based on the pre-existing EAOs.

But the charter offers no guarantees that the persecuted Rohingya will not be excluded from a future nation state. Nor does it offer any commitments to dismantling the Tatmadaw. And the NLD-led government in waiting, as representative of the liberal sections of Myanmar's capitalist class, has no interest in building the forces many believe are necessary to overthrow the Tatmadaw before the conflict descends into a highly militarised civil war that could open the door to intervention by imperialist and regional powers.

"The workers and front-liners in the cities need to be armed immediately", says James. Thousands have left the cities and are now training with EAOs in ethnic-controlled areas and intend to return to the urban centres to fight the Tatmadaw in coming weeks. "But what we need is hundreds of thousands—if not millions—of armed, striking workers in the cities and regional centres, occupying their workplaces and the streets", he says, explaining that such a situation could break the lower ranks of the Tatmadaw from their officers. "Both the generals of the Tatmadaw and the National Unity Government—alongside their imperialist allies—will do everything in their power to prevent such a scenario. But a mass insurrectionary situation is what is needed if our revolution stands a chance of winning. The alternative is a barbarism that we have yet to see the worst of."

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** Names have been changed to protect identities.*

P.S.

• Red Flag. 20 April 2021:
<https://redflag.org.au/article/revolution-and-counter-revolution-myanmar>