

# **Burma/Myanmar: From civil disobedience to armed resistance - what new Myanmar can emerge from today's challenges?**

Wednesday 23 June 2021, by [ROUSSET Pierre](#) (Date first published: 22 June 2021).

**In the aftermath of the military putsch of 1 February, a huge movement of civil disobedience prevented the junta from asserting its control over the country. However, it was able to redeploy its repressive arsenal to try to crush popular dissent. The army intervened throughout the country and no longer only against ethnic minorities in the periphery. In the face of this murderous repression, new forms of popular self-defence have become widespread. Resistance is now a long-term process and is undergoing major changes. A simple return to the situation before the putsch (cohabitation between the elected government and the military) was already impossible. From now on, the question that arises is that of alternatives: in this area too, there will be no return to the past. We have truly entered a new period [1] What kind of new Burma can the present mobilisations herald?**

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Last February, the junta could have been defeated if the international sanctions had been radical and if solidarity with the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) had been equal to the task. This was not the case, and the army had time to take the initiative again, waging an all-out war against the population - a war that is all the more deadly because China and Russia are providing it with heavy weaponry (aircrafts, tanks, artillery) that it did not have before, and because firms (including Western ones) are selling it the latest electronic surveillance devices.

As a result, popular resistance continues under extremely difficult conditions. The civil disobedience movement has gone underground and forms of self-defence are spreading throughout the country, not just in peripheral areas populated by ethnic minorities.

Traditional street demonstrations have become impossible and strikers face severe retaliation. However, "non-violent" forms of struggle continue, including strikes (albeit much less widespread than before) and passive resistance. The junta had to pay lip service to the fact that the "return to normalcy" was not complete [2]. Indeed, the number of qualified personnel working in the banks or in the administration remains insufficient and health workers to a large extent continue to refuse to work under military orders.

Despite the risks, in some urban centres, such as the capital of the Sagaing region (Monywa), flash demonstrations are organised to keep the symbol of civil disobedience alive [3]. The 2021-2022 school year started on 1 June, but the army has not been able to effectively enforce the reopening of

schools (which were closed for a year due to Covid-19) [4].

The junta responded to this multiple and diffuse resistance by evicting people from their homes, by the intervention of paramilitary groups, by assassinations or arrests, or by convictions for collaboration with the new National Unity Government (NUG).

## The National Unity Government

The formation of the Government of National Unity (NUG) is indeed one of the new factors of the situation. Rather than being in exile, it is a clandestine government whose members apparently remain in the country. It embodies the continuity of legal civilian power. It still has Aung San Suu Kyi as its 'State Counsellor', who is now in detention and on trial for high treason, totally isolated from the world. Nevertheless, the NUG is emancipating itself, for the better, from the traditional orientation of the National League for Democracy (NLD, of which Suu Kyi was the leader), which was marked by Bamar ethno-nationalism (Bamar is the name of the majority ethnic group in Burma).

The composition of the National Unity Government is multi-ethnic [5]. On 3 June 2021, the (NUG) published its "Policy Position on the Rohingya in Rakhine State" [6]. This is an important document in many ways. It shows how 'new' Burma could be in the future.

- The NUG acknowledges the seriousness of the harm done to the Rohingya Muslim population, victims of genocide in Rakhine [Arakan] State, a subject that was previously taboo. The dominant Arakanese armed parties [7] in this coastal state violently denounce this statement and for good reason: they were complicit in the genocide and are more often on the side of the Burmese military junta than the democratic resistance. The National Unity Government pledges that "striving to hold perpetrators accountable is not only a way of achieving justice, but also a deterrent to future atrocities. That is why we consider this a priority task. Reparation and justice will be guaranteed in the future constitution of the Federal Democratic Union." The NUG proposes that a genuine international criminal court be established.
- The NUG proposes that true federalism be established in the Union [8] "Sovereignty belongs to the member states and the people of the member states [...]. Everyone in the Union has full enjoyment of fundamental human rights. All ethnic groups who are native to the Union have full enjoyment of individual rights held by individual people and collective rights held by ethnic groups. All citizens who swear allegiance to the Union regardless of their ethnic origins are considered to have full enjoyment of citizens' rights. The National Unity Government will not tolerate any form of discrimination."
- On this occasion, the NUG clarifies its understanding of citizenship, which should replace the 1982 law, in preparation for the drafting of a new constitution: "This new Citizenship Act must base citizenship on birth in Myanmar or birth anywhere as a child of Myanmar Citizens." This definition, commonplace for a Frenchman, represents a real revolution in Burma.

The 1982 law distinguishes three degrees of citizenship designated by the colour of the corresponding identity paper [9]. The **pink card** grants full citizenship. It is automatically granted to all persons whose ancestors resided in the country before 1823 [10], or born to parents recognised as full citizens. The **Blue Card** is reserved for associate citizens, i.e. those who were recognised as citizens under the previous Union Citizenship Law of 1948. The **Green Card** is for citizenship by naturalisation of persons who can prove their presence on Burmese soil before 4 January 1948 and who apply for the first time after 1982. The granting of cards is subject to arbitrary exceptions or restrictions, notified by the Council of State, for sometimes surprising reasons. For example, persons

applying for citizenship by naturalisation must be of *good character* (art. 44d).

It could hardly be more complicated.

A **white card** was distributed in the 1990s to residents who did not fit into any of these categories. It does not give any rights.

Finally, citizenship is recognised through membership of one of the 135 officially recognised ethnic groups. Not only is it unequal, but it also contributes to the entrenchment of these affiliations (as well as the rejection of populations declared to be 'foreign') according to divisions born of the colonial era between Bamar in the plains, minorities in the periphery and imported labour.

There is obviously a long way to go between such commitments and their implementation, but they confirm that there is indeed a generational break and that the "possibilities" envisaged yesterday by marginalised circles, with little voice, are today widely debated by all those who think about the future, about the post-military junta. This rupture is also manifested in the expansion of armed resistance.

### Armed resistance

Popular opposition to the military putsch was evident throughout the country, but the response of parliaments, parties and armies in the ethnic states was often effectively cautious and wait-and-see. A constellation of organisations emerged in many of these states, some negotiating a ceasefire with the junta, others fighting it. This in-between (fighting and negotiating) has been something of a tradition since independence. New factors in this area include:

- **The role of China.** It absolutely needs an agreement with the military junta to protect its investments (considerable in infrastructure) and its companies (textiles in particular, which have been attacked by the resistance in industrial zones). It needs to guarantee the development of its "Burmese Corridor" which gives it access to the Indian Ocean, west of the Strait of Malacca, which the US can block. In particular, it has strategically important oil and gas pipelines there. The border area is the scene of a thousand traffics, from teak wood to precious stones, which in return allow the enrichment of a good number of Burmese army officers. On the northern border, China uses its strong and direct influence on ethnic movements to prevent them from dissenting. This is the case of the very powerful United Wa State Army (UWSA), the best armed and comprising some 30,000 regular soldiers.

- **The use by the Burmese army of its air force and artillery.** It was not equipped with them during the previous major conflicts. It bombed villages, causing massive displacement of the population. This is how the leadership of the Fifth Brigade of the Karen National Union (KNU), which played a leading role in the resistance to the coup and which hosted and protected representatives of the Civil Disobedience Committee (CDM), explains the fact that it signed a ceasefire with the junta: the human cost was becoming too high. However, she says that when the National Unity Government launches an offensive, she will participate. In any case, the Karen state is one where many dissident armed groups have emerged and are still actively fighting.

- **The formation of the People's Defence Force (PDF, attached to the NUG).** There had been talk of forming a federal army - too ambitious a project at the moment if it were to include armies from the ethnic states on the periphery. The government of national unity then created the PDF, under its authority, which operates throughout the Irrawaddy basin. It is staffed by police and army defectors and former officers.

- **The spontaneous emergence of numerous local groups** that take action with makeshift means. They are not under the command of the PDF and the NUG, which they regard (sometimes, often?) with distrust, as a structure that is too bureaucratic for their taste. They are the ones who exploded bombs in schools before the start of the school year as a warning - a mode of action officially condemned by the PDF.
- **Making the junta's supporters insecure.** In lowland areas, armed action rarely takes the form of a frontal attack on the military. It often targets informers in the service of the junta who provide information to the military, or administrators who have taken over from opposing local authorities - some groups also threaten the families of soldiers, which is a matter of debate, especially with the PDF.
- **The beginnings of a guerrilla war in the plains.** As a recent development, actual guerrilla operations are reported in the Sagaing and Mandalay areas. According to information received by *The Irrawaddy* [11], a thousand members of the civil resistance have carried out a series of coordinated attacks with makeshift weapons, which have cost the lives of some thirty soldiers. In Mandalay, three soldiers, including a lieutenant colonel, were killed when they entered a building used as a PDF base.

In the future, the question of the coordination of armed resistance (and the improvement of its armament) will arise. So, perhaps, will the place of women in the struggle. It was prominent in all the popular social sectors from the first hours of the uprising which followed the putsch of 1 February (high school students, health workers, textile workers, civil servants, educators...). It remains evident in the clandestine civil disobedience actions. For my part, I have no indication of their role in the military field.

### Solidarity in the long term

Long-term resistance must be matched by the development of long-term political and financial solidarity. Too few organisations in France mobilised immediately at the beginning of February to build it. We must push for the extension of international sanctions against the Burmese military-economic complex. We must demand the formal recognition of the NUG as the legal representation of the country in place of the junta. Cooperation between the various components of solidarity must be ensured.

The association Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières (ESSF) had launched an appeal for financial solidarity with the Burmese resistance. It collected and transferred €6080. We have recently received confirmation that these funds have been received and distributed via a border area for emergency food and health aid to refugee populations, for the distribution of indispensable means of communication, for the reinforcement of the organisational infrastructure of the CDM-GUN and the links with regional solidarity...

The least we can say is that the French government and presidency are not very vocal about the situation in Burma. Yet they are particularly implicated, because of Total's role in the crisis, given its past and present links with the regime.

Total employees would like to go on strike to protest against the oil giant's support for the military order, but they fear being sacked if they are not defended by the "international community". Emmanuel Macron is silent.

**Pierre Rousset**

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## P.S.

- Last update: 24 June 2023.
- Translation DeepL and Pierre Rousset.

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## Footnotes

[1] For the historical background of the Burmese crisis, see Pierre Rousset, ESSF (article 58320), [La Birmanie, front incandescent de l'Asie orientale : l'arrière-plan de la crise présente](#). An English translation is prepared.

[2] <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-coup-leader-admits-not-in-full-control-of-country.html>

[3] Frontier Myanmar, 15 June 2021, <https://www.frontiermyanmar.net/en/teachers-students-keep-protests-alive-in-fing-stubborn-monywa/>

Available on ESSF (article 58607), [Myanmar: Teachers, students keep protests alive in 'f\\*\\*\\*ing stubborn' Sagaing Region capital Monywa](#).

[4] The Irrawaddy, 19 May 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmars-educators-resist-pressure-from-junta-to-reopen-universities-schools.html>

Available on ESSF, (article 58349), [Myanmar's Educators Resist Pressure From Junta to Reopen Universities, Schools](#).

[5] <http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?article57704>

[6] <https://gov.nugmyanmar.org/2021/06/03/policy-position-on-the-rohingya-in-rakhine-state/>  
Available on ESSF, (article 58468), [Myanmar: Policy Position on the Rohingya in Rakhine State](#).

[7] They call it Arakan State rather than Rakhine.

[8] The “long form” of the country’s name is Republic of the Union of Burma or Republic of the Union of Myanmar.

[9] Juliette Gheerbrant, 4 May 2015, Asialyst, <https://asialyst.com/fr/2015/05/04/limbroglia-de-la-citoyennete-birmane/>  
Available on ESSF (article 58597), [L'imbroglia de la citoyenneté birmane](#).

[10] Start of the Anglo-Burmese War.

[11] <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/around-30-myanmar-junta-troop-2-update-update-updates-killed-in-sagaing.html>  
Available on ESSF (article 58713), [Around 30 Myanmar Junta Troops Killed in Sagaing – Junta](#)

[Colonel Killed in Mandalay.](#)