

Frontier Fridays: The Top Stories in Myanmar this Week

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Welcome to Frontier Fridays. This week, the military regime reconfigured itself as a new “Provisional Government” with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing as prime minister, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations finally named a special envoy to address the Myanmar crisis, COVID-19 continued to devastate the nation, and worrying religious tensions were reported in Rakhine State.

Military dictatorship makeover

On the six-month anniversary of the coup, the junta [announced](#) the formation of a caretaker government (translated as “provisional government” in English state media), along with a minor cabinet reshuffle. Commander-in-Chief Min Aung Hlaing finally took the title of the formal political leader of the country, appointing himself prime minister.

The move drew immediate comparisons to two other military regimes – one contemporary and one predecessor. The contemporary is Prayut Chan-o-cha in Thailand who became prime minister of a caretaker government after the 2014 coup, before winning the 2019 election which was rigged heavily to his advantage. If Min Aung Hlaing goes through with his promise to hold an election in the future, he would be widely expected to similarly tilt the playing field so far in his favour as to essentially guarantee victory. Min Aung Hlaing also seems to be emulating Prayut’s shift from military general to quasi-civilian dictator – we’ve noticed he’s traded in his soldier’s uniform for civilian garb in some recent speeches. The other parallel was Myanmar’s first military dictator Ne Win, who served as a prime minister of a caretaker government from 1958-1960, before ceding power following the 1960 election only to seize control again in the 1962 coup and go on to rule the country until 1988. While English-language state media used the term “provisional government”, the Burmese word is the same as was used to previously describe Ne Win’s “caretaker government”.

Deputy commander-in-chief Soe Win, who also served as vice chair of the State Administration Council, has now been appointed deputy prime minister of the caretaker government. The State and Regional Administration Councils have also been [transformed](#) into state and regional governments. Speaking to Mandalay-based local outlet Voice of Myanmar, junta spokesperson Major-General Zaw Min Tun [said](#) the “SAC will remain” but the SAC’s “management committee” has “taken on government positions”.

The chairpersons of the state and regional administration councils will remain as the chief ministers of the new regime, with some exceptions. A notice in state media informed that [resignations](#) have been accepted from Regional Administration Council chairs of Sagaing, Tanintharyi and Ayeyarwady regions. The state/regional ministers for border and security affairs will continue to be appointed by the military, while [police chiefs](#) will serve as local ministers for transportation.

Min Aung Hlaing also gave an extremely long winded speech shortly before the announcement,

where he touched on a variety of topics, including the promised election. “We will accomplish the provisions of the state of emergency by August 2023,” he said, reiterating his pledge to hold democratic, multi-party elections, something very few people believe.

He repeated his classic takes on alleged fraud in the last election and criticised NLD terrorists and extremists, but also went a bit farther with his Buddhist nationalism this time. He said the NLD is trying to distinguish the Tatmadaw and is “intentionally destroying the culture, traditions and history from the very beginning of all Myanmar national peoples”. Min Aung Hlaing also claimed that devout Buddhists were “disheartened” by the NLD administration. As he noted, most Myanmar people are Buddhist, and the NLD won the election in a massive landslide, so it seems fairly apparent that actually most Buddhists were in favour of NLD rule.

ASEAN (finally) names special envoy

As had been predicted by recent media reports, ASEAN finally appointed a special envoy to address the crisis in Myanmar, naming Brunei’s second foreign minister Erywan Yusof, who was accepted by the military junta. His appointment comes over three months after the regional bloc met in Jakarta and agreed to a five-point plan to resolve the crisis. There are still reasons to be pessimistic, both because of Erywan’s soft approach to the junta so far, and because of Senior General Min Aung Hlaing’s tendency to refuse to honour any agreement he no longer likes.

The Irrawaddy [reported](#) that Erywan emerged as a compromise choice between the junta’s preference for the Thai nominee and Indonesia’s pick. A further compromise proposed a team of advisors to Erywan, that included the Thai nominee, the Indonesian nominee, the Malaysian nominee, and a senior Cambodian diplomat. It’s not clear from yesterday’s joint communique if ASEAN is following through on this proposal.

The [joint communique](#) released by the 10-member bloc was ultimately fairly mild in its language. The statement did not call for the release of political prisoners, for example, but simply reports that they “heard calls for the release of political prisoners.” Foreign prisoners were specifically mentioned, but political leaders like Aung San Suu Kyi and Win Myint were not. The statement did say Erywan would have “full access to all parties concerned,” which presumably would include Aung San Suu Kyi. The junta’s foreign minister Wunna Maung Lwin reportedly [vetoed clauses](#) specifically referencing the two civilian leaders and noting the UN General Assembly condemnation of the coup. As others have pointed out, it’s fairly ridiculous that the body that caused the crisis in the first place has any say in the response, let alone veto power over statements or the appointment of the envoy tasked with resolving it.

Most problematic of all, giving the junta veto power implicitly recognises it as the legal governing body of an ASEAN member state, which it is not. Indonesia insisted after the meeting that the joint communique does not recognise the junta’s legitimacy, and the preamble was stripped of its usual opening line: “We, the Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations”.

On the other side of the legitimacy struggle, US Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman formally [met](#) with the National Unity Government’s foreign minister Zin Mar Aung on Wednesday, the first official contact between the US government and the parallel government. No doubt the two groups have been in communication before now, but formal meetings carry their own legitimacy implications. The State Department statement was cautious, however, avoiding conferring Zin Mar Aung with a “foreign minister” title. It said the pair discussed efforts to return Myanmar to democracy and COVID-19 response, including humanitarian assistance.

Vaccination campaign struggles

The junta's health ministry announced 29,917 new COVID-19 cases this week, and 2,436 more deaths, bringing the official death toll to 10,988, although the real number is almost certainly much higher. Positivity rates dipped a bit this week – there were two days where it dropped below 30 percent, the lowest rates since July 10. But by most standards, the rates still remain concerningly high.

The military regime has begun focusing on its vaccination campaign, with Senior General Min Aung Hlaing saying Myanmar aims to inoculate some 5 million people per month, with 50 percent of the population which would require a massive expansion of the vaccination programme (and vaccine supplies) from what we've seen over the past six months. The state-run Global New Light of Myanmar released a breakdown of vaccinations across different states and regions, supposedly conducted on August 2 and 3, claiming a total of over 78,000 doses were administered. It's not clear if this was meant to be a totally comprehensive list, as it didn't include any vaccinations in Yangon for example.

State media also accused "extremists" of targeting vaccination sites, claiming a bomb went off while vaccinations were being administered in Pekon Township in southern Shan State, where Karenni armed groups have recently clashed with the Tatmadaw. The article claimed that two police officers were killed and another injured, while a volunteer and a vaccine recipient were also injured in the blast. But a bigger impediment might be [vaccine hesitancy](#) by a population that distrusts both the military government and the two main vaccine suppliers – China and Russia – who have both emerged as political allies of the new junta.

And while cases may be declining slightly, the healthcare system remains completely overwhelmed, as evidenced by widespread [oxygen shortages](#) in Rakhine State, where officials are scrambling to build new oxygen plants in Sittwe and Kyaukphyu with assistance from China and India. Even more production plants might not solve the problem however, as two recently constructed plants in Mrauk-U and Thandwe townships have been taken offline due to power cuts and flooding

Religious tensions in Rakhine

Last Thursday, the Rohingya Post [reported](#) that a Rohingya village in Minbya Township was "under total siege" by hundreds of members of the Arakan Army and other ethnic Rakhine civilians. The article said the AA arrived on July 24, occupied a mosque in town, tortured some Rohingya villagers, demanded payment and food donations, and detained family members of 12 individuals on a wanted list.

Apparently in response to the report, AA commander General Twan Mrat Naing tweeted a warning against "disinformation", while making some troubling comments that could be interpreted as racist dog whistles. "We promoted ethnic diversity and religious tolerance but can't afford to provide a safe haven and breeding ground for the terrorists and criminal gangs," he [aid](#). It's somewhat ironic to see the AA accusing anybody else of terrorism, given the Myanmar government had previously declared the armed group a terrorist organisation, a label it rejected despite employing tactics that could be described as terrorist-like, such as assassinating government officials, and kidnapping politicians and even ordinary labourers. "Be aware that you are just about to turn your best friend into enemy by using your best tool of disinformation," he warned ominously.

The comments are also concerning because he doesn't outright deny that a confrontation of some kind has occurred, but instead seems to try to justify the AA's actions by blaming Rohingya "terrorists".

Burma Campaign UK provided an [update](#) the next day, reporting that AA soldiers retreated on

Monday afternoon and released most of the detainees but “abducted” two villagers. It also said those released were forced to sign documents and were filmed claiming no human rights abuses occurred, despite allegedly being forced to pay a “tax” to the soldiers in the form of livestock, food and cash. “We call on the Arakan Army to immediately release the two villagers and to commit to ending all abductions and hostage taking of civilians,” BCUK said in its statement. The commander of the AA, General Twan Mrat Naing, once again seemed to respond to the accusations without directly referring to them, [tweeting](#) about “sensationalism and politicization” of biased human rights activists. Like his last tweet, these comments seem to be channeling Tatmadaw talking points. Twan Mrat Naing then accused his unnamed target of “disingenuously validating the criminal gangs on our soil and sowing the seeds of further division”. Talking about ownership of soil in that way definitely sets our ethnonationalist alarm bells ringing.

Finally, Twan Mrat Naing once more imitated his Bamar government enemies, tweeting a [video](#) supposedly showing Rohingya boys playing soccer with AA soldiers, as apparent evidence that there were no problems in the village. Aung San Suu Kyi infamously referenced a football game between ethnic Rakhine and Rohingya during her defence against allegations of genocide at the International Court of Justice.

In other news... the Central Bank of Myanmar [introduced new restrictions](#) on foreigners working in the financial sector, more dead [bodies were found](#) in Sagaing’s Kani Township bringing the total death toll from multiple alleged massacres to at least 40, clashes between the Tatmadaw and a coalition of Karen armed groups [resumed](#) in Kayah State, and US is reportedly [beefing up personal security](#) for UN representative Kyaw Moe Tun after a threat to his safety.

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