

Prospects for a people's war in Myanmar

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Proliferating People's Defense Forces have the spirit but may not have the means to launch an anti-military civil war.

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BANGKOK – It has taken peaceful protests, bloody massacres, economic collapse and a lethal pandemic but six months after Myanmar's military seized power from an elected government, one reality has become entirely clear: For all the anguished outrage and diplomatic hand-wringing, the "international community" is not coming to the rescue.

The people of Myanmar are on their own with their military jailers and face a simple choice: roll over or fight back. As a countrywide campaign of bombings, targeted killings and armed clashes launched by local "People's Defense Forces" or PDFs indicates, many of the country's youth made that choice some time ago.

More difficult to gauge is where this campaign of grass-roots resistance is headed, what it might realistically achieve and how. Media hyperbole aside, Myanmar is not yet at the point of civil war.

It has, though, descended into a state of violent anarchy marked by a collapse of civil administration and a vacuum of governance that widens by the day. Across much of the country's heartland, military repression has veered into forays by marauding bands of soldiers killing, looting and occasionally burning entire villages.

PDFs have struggled to fight back, if not in direct confrontations, then with often anonymous and brutal vigilante violence that increasingly sets civilians against civilians and risks spilling into the settling of personal or criminal disputes.

This anarchy may well intensify, but it will not likely last. Over the coming nine months through until the monsoon of 2022 arrives next May, Myanmar will almost certainly begin to shift decisively along one of two broad trajectories.

One could see the military, or Tatmadaw, bring to bear its very real strengths – cohesion, discipline, resources and a capacity for unrestrained violence – in reasserting the control of its newly-minted "caretaker government" over central Myanmar.

Reimposed inevitably at different speeds in different regions, military rule would remain widely hated and occasionally subject to violent challenge.

Over time, however, it would provide the basis for stability and a gradual economic revival supported by Russia, China and other Asian states. On that basis, the Tatmadaw would roll out a

planned reconfiguration of the electoral system guaranteeing outcomes in line with its vision of tightly-controlled, or “discipline flourishing”, democracy.

The alternative trajectory would involve a descent into civil war in which today’s fragmented opposition to military dictatorship in the county’s ethnic Bamar heartland achieves a level of organization, leadership and strategic planning needed to sustain resistance and exploit the Tatmadaw’s own vulnerabilities while maintaining the active sympathy of key ethnic minorities.

There is no inevitability about either course: The future of Myanmar remains up for grabs. But both trajectories will hinge on an interplay of factors, most already discernable – what former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld famously termed “known unknowns.”

There will also undoubtedly be a few “unknown unknowns” – events and personalities still unseen.

People’s Defense Forces

The most striking “known unknown” turns on the PDFs. The first ill-organized groups began to emerge in early April primarily in the hinterlands of northwestern Sagaing Region and western Chin State, where on April 4 the Chinland Defense Force (CDF) announced its formation.

Late April and early May saw a dramatic proliferation of groups of varying capabilities such that by mid-July around 125 separate groups in both urban areas and rural regions had declared their opposition to the military’s State Administration Council.

Some – but not all – also declared their allegiance to the opposition shadow administration of the opposition National Unity Government (NUG), set up in mid-April.

At ground level, the impact of PDFs has been palpable though hardly decisive. And in recent weeks it has been attenuated by the impact of both the Covid-19 pandemic and monsoon rains. But activity persists and new fighting coalitions have been announced as groups have sought to pool their resources.

Based on clandestine cells, urban PDFs have focused almost entirely on two primary tactics: bombings using mostly still rudimentary improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and targeted assassinations. Their targets have been overwhelmingly “soft”: local ward offices and other government facilities as well as civil administrators, suspected military informants and members of the Tatmadaw’s political proxy, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP).

In the rural hinterlands, PDFs have developed more overtly as embryonic and still poorly armed insurgent bands. In addition to hitting many of the same soft target-sets seen in the cities, they have also repeatedly attempted to repel Tatmadaw incursions into villages with ambushes by local volunteers using hunting rifles and improvised landmines, often claiming to inflict significant casualties on the military.

Rural-based operations have been notably more effective in ethnic minority regions where newly formed PDFs have been able to operate or establish relations with pre-existing ethnic insurgent groups such as the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), the Karen National Liberation Army (KNLA), the Karenni Army (KA) and others.

Battlefield cooperation that translates into PDF access to modern weapons emerged dramatically in early June in Kayah state on Myanmar’s eastern border, as well as in southern parts of Kachin state

and the adjacent Sagaing Region, where PDFs have fought alongside KIA units. In Chin State, the small Chin National Army (CNA) has opened training facilities for PDF members.

How far ethnic armies will be willing to supply PDFs with modern weapons and in what quantities nonetheless remains a key question. The late June seizure by the Tatmadaw of a large consignment of KIA-manufactured small-arms and grenade launchers headed for the Mandalay region suggested that one pipeline at least is open for business.

But with arms markets in Thailand and Cambodia largely run dry, purchases from sympathetic ethnic sources would need to be crucially supplemented by capture from every guerrilla's closest quartermaster - the enemy.

Another critical "known unknown" centers on the opposition NUG. Since its April 16 establishment on a platform of federal democracy, the NUG's record has been mixed.

With a leadership composed of ethnic majority Bamar parliamentarians from the ousted National League for Democracy (NLD) government and personalities drafted from minority communities, the shadow government has gained some recognition as a putative alternative to a Tatmadaw regime struggling with a crippling deficit of political legitimacy.

It has also succeeded in presenting itself as a point of contact for Western governments unwilling to endorse the military's power-grab, even if under the current circumstances they remain unwilling to extend formal diplomatic recognition to a body whose leaders are geographically scattered and which controls no territory.

Less clear is whether a shadow administration with an uncertain presence on the ground can assert itself as a central planning body and potential quartermaster for a kaleidoscope of local PDFs that without coordination and strategy risk being crushed piecemeal.

Dominated by an older generation of politicians working under the shadow of detained NLD leader Aung San Suu Kyi, the NUG has yet to present any dynamic, let alone charismatic, leadership figures likely to inspire a youth-driven resistance movement.

Nor to date has it been able to command the respect of powerful combatant ethnic armed groups on which it remains largely dependent for sanctuary, training and bases of operations.

Tatmadaw firepower

The military and its vision for the future are mostly "known knowns." But for all its obvious strengths, the Tatmadaw is a sprawling and often shambolic giant with vulnerabilities that the current crisis has highlighted.

Notwithstanding bullish estimates in media reporting of a standing army 350,000-strong, the Tatmadaw's effective combat strength is undoubtedly far lower.

Calculations by Western analysts based on the extent of recruitment shortfalls and chronic undermanning in centrally commanded Light Infantry Divisions (LIDs) and regionally based Military Operations Commands (MOCs) suggest that line infantry battalions are unlikely to number more than 120,000 troops.

In recent years, LIDs in particular have been overstretched by constant deployments and often high casualties in the ethnic borderlands of Kachin, Rakhine, Karen and Shan states.

Today, a vastly extended area of operations imposed by the coup has compounded a perennial problem. In the space of a few weeks, the army has been forced to disperse manpower in support of police at the township-level across much of central Myanmar in addition to ongoing combat and garrison duties in insurgency-prone ethnic states.

A second challenge has been pressure to develop operational intelligence on a threat that only a few weeks ago did not exist, even as PDF elements aggressively target the military's "eyes and ears" - civil administration officials and suspected security force informants

Thirdly, the army has no airborne (parachute) or air-assault (heliborne) capabilities worth the name and only limited strategic airlift assets, all key to rapid mobility in a counterinsurgency campaign. Basically, its operations depend on vulnerable lines of ground and riverine communication and resupply.

The scale of the first two challenges has been reflected in the Tatmadaw's scramble to raise and arm new militias. Since May, the main thrust has centered on the so-called Pyu Saw Htee, a plainclothes force tasked with both local security duties such as vehicle searches, as well as undercover surveillance and identification of PDF operatives.

Named after a warrior prince of Burmese history, the Pyu Saw Htee comprises units of 50 to 100 men based on township centers and is drawn from a pool of Tatmadaw veterans and family members, along with USDP loyalists and members of the hardline Buddhist-nationalist MaBaTha movement. Best estimates suggest a still expanding force of at least 10,000 and perhaps as many as 15,000 men loosely supervised by the Tatmadaw.

Predictably, the proliferation of Pyu Saw Htee units to counter PDF activity has led to a sharp rise in targeted killings of its members and their families by PDF elements. Militiamen have retaliated with killings of NLD and suspected PDF members.

Building resistance

Against this chaotic backdrop, building a capacity for sustained resistance aimed at exploiting the Tatmadaw's weaknesses confronts both the NUG and PDFs with a daunting array of challenges. Whether they are insurmountable, as several analysts who spoke to Asia Times suggested, remains to be seen.

Not least is the need to develop a strategy for protracted guerrilla conflict aimed initially at survival over the coming year, denying the Tatmadaw the consolidation of its coup and eroding the morale of its personnel at field level.

Protracted coup resistance and its inevitable cross-border repercussions would also impact the international environment. A key objective would be undermining the calculus of major neighbors - Thailand, India and China - predicated today on the assumption that, as in the past, the Tatmadaw will soon crush popular dissent and prevail.

Sustained resistance would also provide sympathetic democracies with more solid justification for diplomatic recognition and conceivably financial or even material aid.

Implicit in any strategy for protracted struggle, however, is the need to resist the suicidal allure of "urban guerrilla warfare." Recently, persistent rumors have suggested the coming weeks may bring a coordinated wave of so-called "D-Day" attacks by PDFs countrywide, presumably organized by the

NUG and its defense ministry and almost certainly centered on urban areas.

If there is any truth to the rumors, “D-Day” may briefly seize headlines but will likely cost many lives, lose popular support and end only one way. As 20th century revolutionary movements in China, Vietnam, Algeria and other theaters all discovered, even guerrilla forces enjoying wide popular support have no prospect of survival in well-garrisoned urban areas which they cannot hope to capture.

The American and South Vietnamese defeat of the communist Tet Offensive of January 1968 affords perhaps the bloodiest illustration of this truth. The Tet uprising in cities across South Vietnam was a politically dramatic but hugely costly gamble from which the Vietcong never fully recovered as a military force.

As relevant to Myanmar today is the Indian security forces’ systematic elimination of genuinely popular Kashmiri insurgents who between 1990 and 1991 attempted to base themselves in the state capital of Srinagar.

Moving district by district, an army-led campaign rooted them out with a mix of coerced and paid informants, house-to-house searches and overwhelming firepower when cornered rebels chose to stand and fight.

If quixotic urban adventures can be avoided, the return in the coming months of a significant cohort of several thousand fighters from training camps in ethnic minority-controlled borderlands could serve to reinforce PDFs in the hinterland with a crucially needed injection of capabilities.

In addition to basic weapons training, many young returnees will bring with them a range of military-technical skills such as expertise in demolition and sabotage, communications and intelligence. Some will offer leadership potential and a few, the vital ingredient of personal charisma.

Beyond training, however, at least four other elements would be critical to any viable resistance campaign in the rural hinterlands of central Myanmar. The first is effective coordination between emerging fronts, something which in embryonic form appears to have coalesced in recent weeks.

The second requires unremitting harassment and interdiction of lines of road, rail and river communication aimed over time at establishing insurgent-dominated “no-go” areas where Tatmadaw forces can penetrate only in force and at cost. And the third demands an appreciation that the overriding tactical priority in every engagement must be the seizing of munitions from the enemy.

Finally, the success of resistance in the heartland will hinge critically on advancing relationships with key ethnic armed groups that provide rear areas for the sanctuary, training and logistical aid without which insurgency in central Myanmar would struggle to survive.

Those relations will need to be built on the basis of a new humility on the part of Bamar opposition forces and the NUG, as Myanmar’s ethnic armies now have real choices. One would be to support the resistance either with a view to using Bamar insurgents to tie down and bleed the Tatmadaw; or, more ambitiously, to finally break the military’s stranglehold on national political power.

They also have an alternative course: securing their own regions behind new ceasefires and promises of autonomy that the Tatmadaw will be sure to offer as it turns to strategies of divide-and-rule honed over decades. For the first time since Myanmar’s independence in 1948, the balance of national power appears now to lie largely in the hands of its long-dispossessed ethnic minorities.

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P.S.

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