

Commentary

Correcting Int'l Misconceptions About Myanmar's Struggle

Sunday 6 November 2022, by [Naing Khit](#) (Date first published: 4 November 2022).

This is a brief political explanation for the Singaporean foreign minister, his counterparts and other leaders in the region, as well as UN officials—including the world body's envoy to Myanmar—and all those who have misconceptions about Myanmar's political reality today.

They all need to understand a few basic but vital facts about Myanmar's crisis, because their respective roles give them a shared responsibility for helping to solve it. Unless they understand the reality of the situation, their diplomatic approaches and remedies for battered Myanmar will all be in vain.

Let's face facts.

In his keynote speech at the 37th ASEAN Roundtable on Nov. 1, Singaporean Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan said: "What is happening today is a fight for the heart of the Bamar majority, between the Tatmadaw on one hand and the National League for Democracy led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, who won the election in 2020."

Balakrishnan—who is thought to have a deeper understanding of Myanmar's political situation than his ASEAN counterparts and is known for his admiration of and closeness to detained Myanmar leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and her political struggle—which was given a mandate by the Myanmar people—really shouldn't be making such a fundamental error about the political reality in the country.

It's not only a fight for the heart of the Bamar majority, between the military (or, as Balakrishnan said, the "Tatmadaw"—a term of esteem referring to the military that Myanmar people stopped using when it began cracking down on peaceful protesters after the coup; he should mind his choice of words, too) and the NLD led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi.

In reality, what is happening today in Myanmar is the fight between the whole population of Myanmar and the military. To elaborate—between the whole population whose rights, freedom and opportunities were stolen by the military in February 2021, and the military or ruling junta, which has committed crimes against humanity and war crimes against the entire population after destroying their dreams and future.

To be a bit more precise, it's a fight between the entire population comprising all ethnicities of the country of 55 million people and a handful of generals, their privileged families, and their supporters and apologists.

If the mischaracterization of the situation by those foreign dignitaries was an innocent mistake, it shows how shallow their knowledge of Myanmar's current crisis is, despite their status as key

regional and world figures who are potentially in positions to help solve the Myanmar crisis. If it was intentional, it shows they are trying to distort the real picture of Myanmar's crisis. In that case, one can't help but entertain a conspiracy theory. Could such a misconception have been spread by the junta's apologists around Balakrishnan or other diplomats or UN officials?

No matter the motive, what the foreign minister said belittles the Myanmar people's fight to uproot the military dictatorship.

Such a misconception by foreign diplomats, leaders or UN officials is an insult to young ethnic people who have formed or joined People's Defense Force groups (commonly known as PDFs) in their states since the coup last year, and the older ethnic armed organizations that have supported or joined the Spring Revolution together with the PDFs.



Ethnic people stage a protest against military rule in Yangon in February 2021. / The Irrawaddy

After the military's brutal crackdowns on nationwide anti-coup protests following the coup in February 2021, PDFs emerged across the country. More than 250 have been formed both in Bamar-populated regions like Sagaing and in many ethnic states including Kachin in the north and from Chin in the west to Karen and Kayah in the east and southeast.

Their sole goal is to uproot the military in order to build a genuine federal democracy. Almost every region and state now has PDFs.

Take the country's smallest state, Kayah (or Karenni), with its 300,000 population. Young ethnic people there have formed a dozen forces, including the strongest, the Karenni Nationalities Defense Force (KNDF) led by Khun Be Du. The young ethnic Karenni leader is not a member of the NLD but is now a deputy minister for the parallel National Unity Government, which was formed by ousted NLD lawmakers and ethnic representatives. The KNDF alone has about 8,000 soldiers.

As in Kayah State, thousands of youths in Chin, Kachin, Karen and Shan have also formed PDFs. These young freedom fighters have been battling junta troops in alliance with established ethnic armed organizations like the Karen National Union, Chin National Front, Kachin Independence Army and others.

The PDFs were all formed in 2021 months after the coup. Their leaders officially stated that they formed the new forces in response to the military coup.

Some of the freedom fighters in these new forces might be members or supporters of the NLD, and may even have voted for the party in the 2020 election. But we can't define the fight they are waging as between the NLD and the military. Such a view isn't just shallow, it's fundamentally wrong.

These young fighters and the wider population—whose full support they enjoy—have a common goal to build a federal democracy free of the greedy and cruel generals who have been committing crimes against the entire population after eliminating the result of the election, in which the majority of Myanmar's people, including many ethnic voters, backed the NLD.

Simply put, in the 21st century, the fight in Myanmar is a national struggle to root out a military dictatorship that has, under consecutive leaders, repeatedly destroyed democracy in the country from its first coup d'état in 1962 to the latest in 2021.

Again, it's the definitive fight—the people vs. the military dictatorship. No one has the right to belittle this supreme sacrifice, which has already claimed the lives of countless Myanmar people.

Balakrishnan and other foreign officials must grasp this point if they sincerely want to help solve Myanmar's crisis for the entire population of Myanmar.

Next time, before they say such a thing, they should consider their words with mindfulness and sincerity, for the good of the people of Myanmar.

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P.S.

- The Irrawaddy. 4 November 2022:
<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/commentary/correcting-intl-misconceptions-about-myanmars-struggle.html>
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