

Analysis

Reviewing Myanmar's Spring Revolution, 2 Years on From the Coup

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To mark the anniversary of the military coup on Feb. 1, 2021, The Irrawaddy offers a review of developments in Myanmar's political, economic and military spheres, as well as its international relations, over the past two years.

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Politics

Firstly, the 2008 Constitution was nullified by the putsch. Myanmar's people had no trust in the constitution from the beginning, fully aware that it was drafted by the military to cement its political power.

However, following unexpected reforms under the quasi-civilian government that took power in 2011, people had hoped that the constitution would provide a less bloody political solution to the country's civil war. They also hoped it would become a blueprint for the military's gradual retreat from politics.

When power was handed over to the National League for Democracy (NLD) after it won the 2015 election, people began to believe the constitution would pave the way for full democracy. But they were wrong. The supreme law was always a tool of the military, to bend or stretch for its own interests.

In 2021, the military ignored Section 402 of the constitution which says the Union Election Commission's decision on election results is final. It spuriously claimed widespread fraud in the 2020 general elections as an excuse to stage a coup. The military said its takeover was in line with the constitution; in fact, it was an illegal power seizure by force of arms.

The putsch also put an end to the national reconciliation process. And when the military launched a bloody crackdown on peaceful anti-coup protesters, people lost faith in political means to solve problems. Armed conflicts quickly erupted across the country. Efforts toward national reconciliation

were replaced by destruction.



Police attempt to disperse anti-coup protesters in Yangon in early March, 2021. / The Irrawaddy

Viewpoints have also changed. Between 2011 and 2020, the popular view at home and abroad was that the Myanmar military, as the strongest institution in the country, could not be excluded from politics.

That view has changed since the coup. People now view that Myanmar cannot enjoy peace, stability or development while the military is active in politics. In other words, it is impossible to negotiate with the military for reform or power-sharing.

The military regime is holding so-called peace talks with some of the country's many ethnic armed organizations. But it is obvious that the regime is holding talks only to relieve battlefield pressure, and negotiations will lead nowhere. Over the past two years, the political landscape has changed from national reconciliation to annihilation.

On the ground, thousands of democracy supporters have been detained. Hundreds have been sentenced to death, and many more have been given long prison terms. The regime publicly hanged four democracy activists in July last year. Another 300 or so have died in military custody at interrogation centers.

Meanwhile thousands have been killed in anti-coup protests and battlegrounds.

And more than 40,000 buildings including homes, religious buildings, healthcare facilities, and schools have been torched by the junta.

On the other hand, over 500 members or supporters of the military-backed Union Solidarity and Development Party, junta-appointed administrators, militias and alleged informants were killed by anti-regime forces. Government buildings including around 500 telecom masts have been destroyed and damaged.

The crisis has gone beyond the point of negotiation. As such, calls for annihilation will continue to grow. The military is entrenched, having rejected negotiations with civilian leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi or the parallel civilian National Unity Government (NUG).

Economy

The coup came as a serious blow to Myanmar's economy, which was already plagued by COVID-19. Military rule has sent it spiraling out of control with volatile economic and financial policies. Myanmar's post-coup economic status can be encapsulated in 10 points:

- Foreign firms have pulled out; foreign investments have declined, and sizeable planned investments have stalled.

- International loans are suspended.
- Inflation has soared over 100 percent and the cost of living including food has doubled.
- A black market emerged after the regime introduced a fixed exchange rate in place of floating rates. Prices of imported goods including essentials like fuel and pharmaceuticals have surged due to tight controls on US dollar supply. Though fuel prices are high around the world, in Myanmar the price is double what it should be due to inflation and junta mismanagement.
- Wealth, capital and savings are flowing quickly out of the country due to instability and inflation.
- Manufacturing has been hit by power outages.
- The regime is planning to resume stated-owned factories suspended for making losses.
- Human capital is declining as people leave the country for better economic prospects overseas.
- The hotels and tourism industry has been hit hard by post-coup turmoil as international visitors stay away.
- Myanmar's economy is barely surviving on revenues from oil, gas and agricultural exports.
- The price of gold, dollars and food skyrocketed around August before subsiding in September. However, they began rising again in early January.

So, the past two years have been characterized by economic downturn, a decline in tax revenues, soaring inflation and a cost-of-living crisis, and a budget deficit caused by heavy military expenditures and other factors. This trend looks set to continue this year.

The economic crisis will have serious impacts on Myanmar people, as well as the regime. Oil, gas, and agricultural produce are the only sources of foreign currency for the regime.

International relations

The international community is playing a significant role in Myanmar's crisis, but ultimately it is Myanmar's people who will decide the fate of their country.

The regime is undoubtedly losing on the diplomatic front. It has been snubbed by the United Nations and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

The regime is under increasing pressure to abide by ASEAN's five-point consensus for peace, which it has so far ignored. A UN resolution adopted in December, the first on Myanmar in more than 70 years, is also a headache for the junta. China and Russia, which the regime thought it could count on as allies, chose not to veto the resolution. On the world stage, the regime is fast running out of friends.

The US's Burma Act, passed in December, was another hammer blow to the junta. The act commits the US to helping restore civilian governance for Myanmar and to pursuing accountability for human rights violations. Notably, it also green-lights non-military assistance for anti-junta forces including ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) and People's Defense Forces (PDFs).



A People's Defense Force graduation ceremony in 2021.

The US decision to directly engage with EAOs, PDFs and the NUG is a significant departure from its previous reform push, which was centered on the Myanmar military. This decision demonstrates that Washington no longer believes negotiation with the junta is a practical solution. Further actions on top of the Burma Act can now be expected from the US.

In yet another serious diplomatic blow, China has distanced itself from the junta in a departure from its usually close relations with Myanmar military regimes.

Beijing has reduced high-level relations with the junta over the past two years, while also suspending planned large-scale investments. Tellingly, China snubbed the junta's invitation to the second Lancang-Mekong Cooperation meeting.

Beijing decided not to veto the UN resolution after it became clear that the regime is unable to stabilize the country, has tarnished its international reputation by committing atrocities against its own people, and has become too close to Russia. And China is well aware of the extent of the armed uprising in Myanmar.

The change in stance of its most powerful ally is putting pressure on the regime. China has suggested that regime leaders hold talks with civilian leader Daw Aung San Suu Kyi as a way out of the political crisis. But the junta has refused to do so.

Min Aung Hlaing's regime does appear to retain good ties with its neighbor Thailand. But this is hardly surprising given the fact that Thailand avoided the ravages of World War II by engaging both warring sides. Today, it carries out joint military drills with both the US and China.

Similarly, Thailand provides shelter for Myanmar's democracy forces while also maintaining friendly relations with Myanmar's military. Bangkok's foreign policy is a balancing act. It is unlikely to upset that delicate balance by going against the US and ASEAN over the Myanmar crisis.

Among the few countries that currently offer support to the regime are Russia, Belarus, India and Japan.

Russia and Belarus engage with the regime mainly to sell weapons. They are unlikely to make massive investments in Myanmar. And politically, Russia is likely to heed Beijing's opinion when the UN Security Council makes decisions on Myanmar.

India and Japan cooperate more openly with the regime. Delhi has dispatched high-level delegations to Myanmar. It also turned a blind eye recently when the regime used India's airspace to attack the headquarters of the revolutionary Chin National Front near the Indian border, resulting in bombs landing on Indian soil.

Japan is cooperating with the regime via Nippon Foundation chairman Yohei Sasakawa and former Japanese MP Hideo Watanabe, who have influence in Japanese government circles.

The main intention of both India and Japan, however, is to offset China's political and economic influence in Myanmar. But the two countries have neither a veto at the UN Security Council nor influence over ASEAN. And they have only relatively small investments in military-ruled Myanmar. So, the regime can't expect much from the two.

On the diplomatic front, democratic forces are gaining the upper hand and the regime is struggling for a foothold on the world stage.

Military

This is the deciding factor for the future of Myanmar. The 2021 coup was followed by anti-coup protests that soon expanded to a nationwide armed struggle after the military's bloody crackdown on peaceful rallies.

The fighting has been most intense in Kachin, Chin, Kayah (Karenni), Karen and Mon states as well as in Sagaing and Magwe regions. While the pre-coup armed struggle was limited to border zones of ethnic states and rural areas, Myanmar's military is now facing attacks in urban areas including major cities like Yangon and Mandalay.

The scale of the ongoing armed revolution is unprecedented in Myanmar. Regime forces are overstretched and exhausted, fighting on multiple fronts across the country. The military is often unable to send reinforcements when a base comes under attack. Instead, it has increasingly relied on artillery and air attacks, part of a scorched-earth strategy against civilians to dent their faith in revolution.

Over the past two years, junta forces have torched more than 40,000 buildings across the country, or an average of 55 per day. The arson campaign against civilian communities has severely tarnished the already unenviable reputation of Myanmar's military.

Over 8,000 clashes of various size have also been recorded since the coup. That's an average of 11 clashes per day. Hardly a day goes by without the Myanmar military suffering casualties. Unsurprisingly, it is now struggling to recruit new soldiers.

Daily clashes, casualties and exhaustion have sapped morale within the military. On the other hand, morale is rising within resistance forces.

The armed struggle that started in 2021 differs from past crises, such as the 1948 turmoil that led to civil war. In the past, armed struggle has been launched by a particular party or organization after careful preparation.

In contrast, the uprising after the 2021 coup was a popular and spontaneous movement, unexpected and unplanned. People were pushed into the war after they, their relatives or their friends were met with military firepower during street protests.

It was only after people rose up against the regime that the parallel civilian National Unity Government (NUG), and its People's Defense Force (PDFs) armed wing emerged to unify the scattered resistance. The NUG is rallying revolutionary forces and also establishing alliances with EAOs.



PDF troops in upper Myanmar.

The NUG has so far established about 300 battalions and has links with some 400 local PDFs. A PDF battalion has around 200 troops, meaning the NUG has mustered an army of around 60,000 resistance fighters, excluding local PDFs.

Though the NUG has yet to unify all resistance forces under a single command, it has made impressive progress developing a nationwide network of resistance forces over the past two years.

Many of those resistance fighters have undergone basic military training and have gained combat experience. But arming all of its battalions, not to mention local PDFs, remains a challenge for the NUG.

However, the mob that fought the Myanmar military with rudimentary hunting rifles and homemade weapons has evolved into a regimented armed force equipped with modern automatic rifles and drones.

Its fighting force is bolstered by battle-hardened troops of EAOs, including the Kachin Independence Army, Karen National Union, Chin National Front, Chinland Defense Force, Karenni National Progressive Party, Karenni Nationalities Defense Force, and the All Burma Students Democratic Front. Their combined forces of 45,000 troops are cooperating fully with the pro-democracy Spring Revolution to topple the regime.

Although the Arakan Army, Ta'ang National Liberation Army and the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army have engaged in fewer clashes with junta troops, the three groups are understood to be supporting Spring Revolution forces with weapons or equipment. They also pose a serious threat to the regime as clashes between junta troops and the three EAOs, with a combined strength of some 45,000 troops, could erupt at any time.

Three other EAOs with a combined force of about 45,000 - the United Wa State Army, National Democratic Alliance Army, and the Shan State Progress Party - barely engage with the country's resistance forces. But neither will they fight for the regime, preferring the role of self-interested onlookers.

Two other groups, the Restoration Council of Shan State and the New Mon State Party, with a combined force of around 10,000 troops, have adopted a neutral position in the fighting but are also making deals with the regime.

Signatories to the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement, namely the Democratic Karen Benevolent Army, Karen National Union/Karen National Liberation Council-Peace Council, Palaung National Liberation Organization, Arakan Liberation Party, and the Lahu Democratic Union, are under the control of the regime. But they are unlikely to join the regime-friendly Border Guard Force and militias in fighting alongside junta forces.

So, it is fair to say the majority of EAOs have sided with the anti-regime forces. Revolutionary forces still have certain weaknesses, though. They are not yet fully armed, they have few weapons to

counter airstrikes, they lack artillery and they are not yet under a single chain of command needed to conduct synchronized attacks.

Despite this, Myanmar's military is in no position to crush Spring Revolution forces and their EAO allies. On the other hand, it is unlikely that revolutionary forces can oust the regime this year. More certain, though, is that Spring Revolution forces have emerged as a formidable army over the past two years.

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• The Irrawaddy. 31 January 2023:

<https://www.irrawaddy.com/opinion/analysis/reviewing-myanmars-spring-revolution-2-years-on-from-the-coup.html>