

# Two years after the military putsch, Myanmar's forgotten war

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**On 1er February 2021, the Burmese army (Tatmadaw) broke off its governmental cohabitation with the National League for Democracy (NLD), incarcerating its leaders, and then plunged the entire country into an atrocious asymmetric war. Two years later, it has still not succeeded in imposing its control over a large part of the territory. Despite their inferiority in arms, the various components of the resistance have defeated it, with the aim of putting an end to a military regime that has made clear its refusal of any democratic transition.**

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By way of introduction, let us quote the statement issued on 1er February 2023 by the Women's Peace Network. It is a powerful expression of what we all feel as we follow the day-to-day struggle of the people of Burma:

*"Two years since the Burmese military's attempted coup, over five years since its 2017 attacks of genocide, and after its decades of atrocities against our communities, we, Women's Peace Network, are conflicted with speechless tragedy and rage. The military remains free to brutalize the entire country even after murdering nearly 3,000 civilians, arbitrarily arresting and detaining over 17,000, and torturing hundreds of thousands more in only two years. Its forces are escalating its airstrikes and use of heavy weapons in Chin State, Sagaing Region, Karen State, Kachin State, Arakan, and many other areas where our communities reside. Both in these areas and in nationwide prisons and interrogation centers, the patriarchal and misogynistic military is targeting women and girls with the most brutal forms of sexual violence. Rohingya are now facing a growing risk of the military's genocidal attacks: over the past two years, the junta has issued and reissued policies and restrictions to arrest and detain at least 2700 Rohingya, including over 800 women." [1]*

**Rage** at the solitude in which the martyred population has been left by the so-called "international community", while it has engaged in resistance to the dictatorship with immense courage. **Rage**, because if the deserved help had been given in time, the putsch would have been aborted and a thousand sufferings would have been avoided. **Admiration** at the capacity of so many organisations,

so many people, to face the worst of adversities. **Hope**, because although the junta was not driven out of the country, it was not able to stabilise its rule, despite all the support it received from the great powers China and Russia, but also from India and Pakistan with their considerable regional weight, from Vietnam and its (other) neighbours, Laos and Thailand... Today, it would only controls militarily half of the territory, or a little more, and has not succeeded in breaking the spirit of popular resistance. This is why the Women's Peace Network calls it an *attempted* coup.



*A poster naming coup leader Min Aung Hlaing as a criminal is seen during a demonstration in February. The Irrawaddy*

## **Two years on: the violence of repression, the successes of the resistance**

Everyone commemorates the second anniversary of the military coup in their own way [2].

The resistance organised a one-day “silent strike” from 10am to 3pm in many parts of the country, a “dead city” operation. Abroad, rallies were held in front of embassies, shouting at the name of dictator-general Min Aung Hlaing, the junta’s leader. The largest of these rallies was probably held in Thailand, with several hundred demonstrators sometimes carrying a portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi or holding up three fingers, the rallying sign of the youth mobilised against the absolute monarchical order in the Thai kingdom, where a large Burmese immigrant community resides. This community is both welcomed and monitored by a regime that essentially supports the junta.



*Demonstrators in Mandalay react to the crackdown, 3 March 2021. (The Irrawaddy )*

The junta, after extending the state of emergency for another six months, imposed martial law in 37 localities (within eight regions and states), including the strongholds of the resistance in the regions of Sagaing and Magwe. It gives full powers to regional commanders and military courts will deal with any criminal case they consider to be a challenge to the regime. It announces that the death penalty and life sentences will be handed down. No appeals against the verdicts will be allowed, except in the case of the death penalty, in which case appeals may be submitted to... Generalissimo Min Aung Hlaing himself, for final decision.

In 2021, the regime had already declared martial law in parts of Yangon (Rangoon), Mandalay and Chin State. Nearly 100 people were sentenced to death [3].

What is the toll of the junta’s campaign of terror over the past two years? According to the

Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (AAPP), more than 2,500 people have been killed (including some 300 in military interrogation and detention centres), more than 16,500 others have been arrested and more than 13,000 are still being held today. 138 death sentences were handed down, 41 of which were *in absentia*. In July, four political prisoners accused of “terrorism” were hanged. These were the first executions since the late 1980s. In November, seven students from Dagon University were sentenced to death.

It is estimated that at least 1.1 million people have been displaced by the war (some say three million). More than 40,000 buildings - houses, religious buildings, schools, health facilities - are reported to have been razed or burnt down by the junta [4].

However, despite this campaign of terror and the army’s overwhelming superiority in armaments, the military situation has evolved against the junta. General Min Aung Hlaing himself acknowledged, on the anniversary of the coup d’état of 1er February 2021, during a meeting of the general staff, that *“The state of the nation has not yet returned to normal: more than a third of the districts are not fully under military control. A euphemism that amounts to an admission of failure. Speaking to the National Defence and Security Council, he said that his regime was in control of only 60% of Myanmar’s 330 townships, while 132 remain strongly contested . [5]* The initiative is currently with the resistance. Tatmadaw is suffering serious setbacks in Chin, Shan, Karen and Kachin states, as well as in the Sagaing and Magwe regions.

In addition to military casualties, more than 500 members or supporters of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP, the military’s political arm), junta-appointed administrators, militias and suspected informers were killed by the resistance. Government buildings and about 500 telecommunication towers were destroyed or damaged.

Burma’s future remains open, despite everything. An entire chapter in the country’s history has been closed in a paroxysmal crisis. The junta wanted to ensure that the military ruling caste would restore a *monopoly* on power over the whole of society, but this power is now being challenged. A return to the situation before the putsch seems impossible, as the last attempt at a peaceful democratic transition was aborted in a bloodbath. There is something definitive about this failure. Generations of senior officers have come and gone, but the army has not changed and will not change. The current struggles are no longer about imposing an ‘acceptable’ compromise on Tatmadaw, but about defeating it once and for all.

## **A look back at the spring 2021 revolution**

The focus today is on the situation two years after the putsch of 1er February 2021, commemoration of ‘anniversaries’ obliges. Anyone unfamiliar with Burma’s history might think that Tatmadaw seized power in 2021, overthrowing a civilian government. In fact, it was in March 1962 that a junta, then led by General Ne Win (he retired in 1988 and died in 2002), conquered it [6]. It has never really abandoned it since. Ne Win claimed to be both a socialist (it was fashionable then, but he was not) and an anti-communist (which he was). He plunged the country into dictatorship, isolation and bankruptcy. Determined to break this deadlock, General Than Shwe partially liberalised the economy and political life, allowing Burma to reintegrate into the regional market and the “international community”. From 2011 to 2021, ‘civil society’ has developed significantly, in terms of associations, parties and trade unions, whereas previously anti-dictatorial movements were regularly broken up in blood.

In order to ensure electoral legitimacy, the army created a political party, the USDP, in the belief that it would win the 2020 elections. It spearheaded the drafting of a tailor-made constitution in

1998. This automatically gives her a blocking minority in all legislative assemblies, where 25% of the unelected seats are reserved for her, in addition to the seats her party and its allies would have won (she can thus prohibit the adoption of a constitutional amendment, which requires at least 75% of the votes). She is automatically given the leadership of key ministries (Defence, Interior and Border Security). The military institution is protected from any control by a civilian authority. The junta thus imposes its pre-eminence within the government coalition.

However, the National League for Democracy, not the USPD, won the 2020 elections by a landslide, with 82% of the vote, with Aung San Suu Kyi imposing herself on the Burmese political scene and crystallising the rejection of the military order in the central regions. Armed with her electoral legitimacy, she accepted the very risky experiment of government cohabitation with the army. However, it was quite illusory to believe that Tatmadaw would voluntarily cede its prerogatives following a legislative election, at least without massive mobilisations of the population (which Suu Kyi did not want). She gambled on a gradual shift in the civil-military balance of power within the regime. She paid an exorbitant price for this gamble: the endless detention, incommunicado detention, mass arrest and assassination of party cadres of which she was the leading figure.

### **The putsch and the response**

So, the army's objective was not to *conquer* power - it already had it - but to *monopolise* it again, while Aung San Suu Kyi was threatening to investigate corruption cases and push her advantage beyond what Tatmadaw was willing to accept. That's why I generally refer to it as a *putsch*, rather than a coup, or a *pre-emptive* coup.

The putsch provoked a huge popular outcry. The day after, in the centre of Rangoon, the population occupied the balconies in a concert of pans, reputed to chase away the "evil spirits". Hospitals went into open dissent and high school students took to the streets. Civil servants were not left out, in the railways, in the banks. The vast majority of the country refused to be under the control of the army, to live and work under the authority of the military or their representatives. On 6 February, textile workers demonstrated in the industrial zone of Rangoon. Civil disobedience quickly spread throughout the country, culminating in a general strike on 22 February, with more than a million people marching in many places and many more multiplying work stoppages.