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‘The Myanmar junta is isolated and cannot win this war’

Three years after the coup in Myanmar: Thitinan Pongsudhirak on the civil war, the resistance movement and a possible post-war order

Three years after the coup, the junta in Myanmar has failed to consolidate its grip on power. What is the situation in the country now?

The civil war is very violent. People are dying on a daily basis on both sides. But over the three years, there has been a complete shift. The war has reached a point of no return, it has become unwinnable for the Myanmar military. This is a big surprise. Since the coup on 1 February 2021, the resistance coalition has gradually gained ground after an initial stalemate, now winning the civil war. Not in a dramatic slide, but in a very grinding, violent, painstakingly tragic war.

Who is the resistance coalition?

The resistance coalition has different columns, beginning with the different ethnic armies, the so-called *Ethnic Armed Organizations (*EAOs), which have been fighting the Myanmar military for decades. The army has mostly been able to keep them in check.

Myanmar is an ethnically diverse country. About 40 per cent of the population is from various ethnic groups which are based along the borders with India, China, Laos and Thailand — the Chin, Kachin, Shan, Karenni, Karen, Mon and Rakhine, as well as a myriad of other ethnic groups, many of them with their own armed groups. The difference in this civil war is that many Bamar, the ethnic Burmese majority, who make up around 60 per cent of the population, also took up the fight against the military. The country is mostly united in its opposition and disdain for the junta. This is a game-changer.

Many young Bamar and young people from other ethnic groups, men and women in their teens and 20s, picked up the fight. They grew up during the opening of the country, after five decades of military

dictatorship. In the decade from 2011 to 2021, they had opportunities and possibilities that their grandparents never had — they certainly did not want to go back to that dark era of junta rule. Many engaged in the Civil Disobedient Movement, trying to block the military dictatorship with strikes. The brutal and bloody crackdown by the army galvanised the majority of the country. Within half a year after the coup, the *People*'s *Defense Forces* (PDFs) formed, consisting of many of these young men and women who fight the military in small groups, organised into units across the different towns and villages in the country. They are using guerrilla tactics, ambushing groups of soldiers and stealing their weapons. This is a nationwide revolt.

Are the *Ethnic Armed Organizations* and the *People*'s *Defense Forces* cooperating?

Some of the *People*'s *Defense Forces* are trained by *Ethnic Armed Organizations,* and, to some extent, they work together under the guidance of the National Unity Government, the civilian leadership of the resistance, which consists of a few of the members of the last democratically elected government. While the PDF squads continue to use guerrilla tactics – to which the military reacts with brutal assaults, including aerial bombardments of villages – the EAOs are more like militias, even conventional small armies, who fight the military as they did for decades. They attack army outposts and even military bases.

A major turning point was last October when the *Three Brotherhood Alliance* – consisting of the EAOs *Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army*, the *Ta'ang National Liberation Army* and the *Arakan Army* – launched a coordinated offensive in the northern Shan state near the Chinese border. They seized some two dozen towns and hundreds of military outposts. Other EAOs were then encouraged to go on the offensive as well. Since then, more towns have been taken by resistance columns, and additional military outposts have been overrun. More and more areas around Myanmar have now been liberated from junta domination.

How is the military responding?

The morale within the army is low. They are constantly being ambushed, be it from EAOs or from PDF-guerrilla units. They are losing troops on a daily level, many are killed, with some desertions and defections and with no new recruits in sight. The junta's high command is internationally isolated by the EU and the US, whereas their ally Russia is fully engaged in Ukraine and is not helping much.

Very important is also that even China is not helping, since the junta turned a blind eye to scam centres at the border to China from where many Chinese citizens were exploited in online schemes. China even gave the green light for the operation of the *Three Brotherhood Alliance* in October. The Myanmar junta is therefore isolated and cannot win this war.

What will come after the junta?

That is the existential challenge. No one knows. Clearly, the coup is failing, and the resistance is winning, though it is not predictable how long the war will drag on. But what comes after? Are there prospects for a workable power-sharing system after the military dictatorship?

The resistance needs to come up with a viable alternative. The National Unity Government has to come up with an outlook for the future. They say they want to build a federal democratic union, a democratic system with a federal government and some autonomy for the different ethnic states that comprise Myanmar. But that will be a difficult path to reach. Navigating towards such a compromise is tough work that has yet to begin in earnest.

The worst-case scenario is that Myanmar will be irrevocably fragmented and balkanised. Different states would have different ethnic armies, each controlling their own territories, raising their own taxes, engaging in illicit trade – like some EAOs have been doing for decades – while the central authority becomes ineffective and incapable of holding the country together. In this scenario, Myanmar could become a hotspot for transnational crime, the production of drugs and the trafficking of women, children and labourers, and so on.

What could a good scenario look like?

A good scenario would involve some kind of power-sharing, as we saw after 2011 when ex-general Thein Sein on the military side served as president until 2016. With the help of technocrats, he implemented reforms and development projects, attracted foreign investments and opened up the country diplomatically. Civilian structures could develop, and eventually, Aung San Suu Kyi and her National League of Democracy won the elections in 2015 to carry on until the coup. Today, there is no one from the military side that seems credible and acceptable to be involved in a power-sharing transition into a federal, democratic system. It is also very doubtful that Aung San Suu Kyi can again play a role in a post-civil-war Myanmar.

How should the international community engage?

The international community should play a mitigating and supportive role in helping the people in Myanmar help and sort out problems among themselves — especially ASEAN, although the grouping has a rather weak record. Since it responded to the coup with the 'five-point consensus' in April 2021, which was ignored by the junta, it has done nothing. Nevertheless, it is the only major Southeast Asian network which includes Thailand, Myanmar's next-door neighbour, and Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore, who want to engage.

The broader international community, like the EU, the UK and the US, also has a role to play. But being realistic, the world is full of flashpoints and hotspots: Russia's war against Ukraine, Hamas and Israel, or the power struggle between the US and China. Still, it is in their interest to pay attention because Myanmar can become a breeding ground for transnational crime that could end up on their doorstep. They can engage Myanmar in conjunction with China, which is drastically affected by the turmoil in its neighbouring country. China sees its investments, amongst others a pipeline and its infrastructure projects as part of the China-Myanmar Economic Corridor, which is part of the Belt and Road Initiative, in jeopardy. China banks on a stable Myanmar and could be a partner in an international effort to mitigate, mediate and facilitate. But ultimately, how the civil war grinds down and what comes up after it will be decided from within the country.

This interview was conducted by Alexander Isele.



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