

Myanmar's 2021 Military Coup, Its Impact on Domestic Politics, and a Revolutionary Road to Democratization?

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The Myanmar military staged a coup against the elected civilian government in February 2021. Since then, the country has been in a state of emergency and ruled by a military junta. Resistance to the coup was swift and widespread, beginning with the Civil Disobedience Movement that has now morphed into the People's Defense Forces. A state of civil war has remained for well over two years now, reversing the previous trend toward democratic transition. Nonetheless, the democratic interlude has spawned strong resistance to military rule. The armed conflict and contestation for power looks set to continue into the medium term and may eventually lead to domestic political changes toward democratization.

Keywords Myanmar, State Administration Council, Civil Disobedience Movement, National Unity Government, People's Defense Forces, Ethnic Armed Organizations

Introduction

The Myanmar military led by Senior General Min Aung Hlaing staged a coup against the National League for Democracy (NLD)-led elected government in February 2021. Since then, the country has been wracked by political violence and members of the ousted government have gone on to form a National Unity Government (NUG) in exile. Widespread resistance to the coup in the form of a Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM) has partly morphed into the People's Defense Forces (PDFs) at the urging of the NUG. The ensuing widespread fighting and contested legitimacy has led to a situation where most observers think that a negotiated settlement between the military and its detractors is no longer feasible. Interviews with members of the Myanmar diaspora from Singapore, Thailand, and the United States indicate strong support for the NUG and a desire to permanently rid the country of military rule. The dozen

interviewees were chosen from a pool of Myanmar academics based abroad, active public office bearers during the democratic transition period, and Myanmar professionals who left the country after the coup.

Prior to the 2021 coup, Myanmar underwent a seemingly democratic transition for a decade from 2011 onward, when the military junta in power then paved the way for a national election in November 2010. That first election was won by the military's Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP) after the NLD refused to compete in the elections on account of having been deprived power following its own victory in 1990. Therefore, the 2011 government was led by ex-military officers with President Thein Sein as the head of government. Following the NLD's reregistration as a party and having won forty-three out of forty-five seats in the 2012 by-elections, it entered parliament as an opposition party and further strengthened its widespread support base to win the 2015 elections. Led by Aung San Suu Kyi, its popular leader, the party won the elections again in 2020 by an even larger margin. Conversely, the USDP was weakened and failed to serve the electoral aspirations of the military. It was against the backdrop of this humiliating defeat that the military staged a coup citing widespread fraud albeit international monitors judged the process to be credible.

The literature on democratization and democratic consolidation does suggest that the process of transition from authoritarian to democratic rule is neither linear nor irreversible. In fact, countries like Nigeria and Pakistan serve as prime examples of regression and return to military rule. There is now a growing body of literature on democratic consolidation and backsliding in Asia (Sridharan 2012; Hanley and Cianetti 2021). There has also been a focus on the importance of structural conditions and constitutionalism as a means of establishing and maintaining democracies in Asia (Pop-Eleches and Robertson 2015; Davis 2017). In fact, many of the reasons for Myanmar's backslide into a return to military authoritarianism was the result of structural deficits in the 2008 Constitution that was crafted by military strongman General Than Shwe prior to his retirement (Ganesan 2021). That document empowered the military and allowed it to maintain a 25 percent bloc presence in the otherwise democratically elected parliament. It also forbade parliamentary oversight on the military and civilian supremacy—widely regarded as a key feature of civil-military relations favoring democratic governance. In fact, contrary to that civilian democratic spirit, the 2008 Constitution sanctioned the overthrow of an elected government in the face of a perceived threat to the nation or the Constitution itself (Taylor 2009, 498). Hence, it is arguable that the NLD-led government, despite being democratically elected, was unable to further the country's democratization. Unlike the first five years during the Thein Sein government when Suu Kyi was able to interact with ranking military officers, she was unable to do so with General Min Aung Hlaing who operated out of his military compound. During its term of office from 2015 to 2020, the NLD attempted to revise the Constitution and gradually decrease

military representation in parliament. However, its attempts were thwarted by the military that opposed the revisions, making such efforts futile.

This article details the current situation in Myanmar domestic politics, more than two years since the coup. It argues that the course of democratization has been totally reversed but that the democratic interlude from 2011 to 2020 had a profound impact on the country's population. The interlude has led most of the population to reject a return to military rule. This rejection is manifested in both the ongoing civil conflict between the military and the PDFs and the determination of the latter to secure victory through force of arms. Members of the Myanmar diaspora abroad are supportive of the NUG and deeply involved in raising funds for the fight against the military. Consequently, the ongoing conflict is likely to be long and drawn out with contestation for power and control of territory.

The article is divided into five major sections. The first section briefly traces the country's political history and the involvement of the military in governance since independence. The second section identifies the major post-coup developments with a focus on the CDM, NUG, and PDFs. The third section documents the areas where the conflict is the most intense and the fallout from it, including the large number of casualties and displaced persons. The next section examines the fate of the Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) that the previous governments had undertaken to end conflict with a certain number of Ethnic Armed Organizations (EAOs) and how it has unraveled. The fifth and final section identifies the likely future trajectory of the situation and ends with a brief conclusion.

Background to the Coup

Certain developments that occurred during the tenure of the NLD-led government from 2016 to 2020 laid the groundwork for the military's unhappiness with Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD. Some of these reasons involved the popularity of Suu Kyi and the NLD while others derived from policies associated with the government that seemingly alienated the military. Then there were challenges to governance from armed groups that tested the military and placed it in a defensive position.

There is little doubt that the popularity of Suu Kyi and her leadership of the NLD rattled the military, and Min Aung Hlaing in particular. Suu Kyi was widely held in high regard throughout the country and scores of people turned up wherever she went. Popularly worshipped as *Ameh* or *mother* in the Bamar language, Suu Kyi commanded loyalty with an almost cult like status. Having been barred from holding the office of the President on account of her husband and children holding foreign citizenship, the office of State Counselor was crafted

for her to wield power. Accordingly, appointees to the office of President were her handpicked confidants as well. The 25 percent appointed military officers in parliament stood up in unison to protest the creation of her office of State Counselor to indicate their strong displeasure (Ganesan 2021, 400). Additionally, the NLD's legal advisor who was responsible for helping to create the office was assassinated in broad daylight at Yangon international airport returning from a trip to Indonesia. A constitutional lawyer by profession, Ko Ni was also rumored to be planning ways to overcome the rule to bypass the military appointees to amend the 2008 Constitution with a view to reducing the percentage of appointed military Members of Parliament—one that the military had sworn to protect (*Mizzima* 2017). The Constitution was often cited to justify Min Aung Hlaing's actions that would have otherwise been regarded as undemocratic.

The NLD and Suu Kyi understood that the strengthening of democracy in Myanmar required amending the 2008 Constitution to gradually phase out appointed military representatives. Accordingly, parliamentary committees were created and assigned to the task of identifying clauses in the Constitution that were undemocratic and sought to amend them (San 2020). The efforts came to naught, though, since the military vetoed the proposals. In fact, such proposals would never have been ratified by parliament since the process requires a super majority of 75 percent of the Members of Parliament to vote in favor of it. The military had always voted as a bloc to secure its own corporate interests. Suu Kyi was keen to remove what was effectively the military's veto power on constitutional amendments. This power allowed the military to oppose and deflect policies that were not in its corporate interests. However, going through the process sent a clear signal to the population that the NLD regarded the Constitution as undemocratic. Even during the 2020 election campaign, one of the NLD's campaign platforms was amending the Constitution. Such actions made it clear to the military that Suu Kyi was not prepared to work within the framework of military dominance over the political process. This constant targeting of the Constitution alienated the military that regarded it as sacrosanct. Additionally, General Min Aung Hlaing remained independent from parliament and never cooperated with it.

Two of the NLD's other actions infuriated the military. The first of these was the government's refusal to convene the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC) that had a membership of eleven persons drawn from the government and the military. The military clearly signaled its desire that the NDSC should have been convened when it regarded situations as threatening the country's national security. However, doing so would have allowed the military to declare a state of emergency and bypass the parliament since it held a majority of six out of the eleven seats in the NDSC. Hence, throughout the NLD's five-year term of office from 2016 to 2020, the NDSC was never convened, even at the height of the crisis with the violence against the Rohingya Muslims and their

flight to neighboring Bangladesh in 2017. Similarly, the Arakan Army fought strongly against the military in 2019 in Rakhine State after moving from Kachin State, despite retaining its headquarters in Laiza. The NLD-led government only allowed for the declaration of a state of emergency in affected townships rather than the entire state. It knew then that it would lose control of a state under a state of emergency when administrative power would be handed to the military. In fact, it was known that Suu Kyi's advisers on security matters were not from the military (author's interview with senior official from the Myanmar Peace Centre's Peace Monitoring Mission, Yangon, January 5, 2020).¹ She did, however, benefit from the advice of some NLD members who were ex-military officers and General Thura Shwe Mann, a high-ranking military officer who chose to collaborate with Suu Kyi and the NLD-led government.

The military exercised administrative power in several ways. Firstly, and most importantly, it controlled the Ministry of Home Affairs. Within that ministry, the General Administration Department (GAD) held the highest-ranking bureaucrats who controlled the various ministries. Importantly, many of these ranking bureaucrats had been seconded from the Ministry of Defense in mid-career. This was a tactic used by Generals Ne Win (who headed the first military authoritarian government from 1962 to 1988) and Than Shwe to prevent young officers from holding command positions over active troops and staging a coup like what happened in Thailand in 1981 in the coup attempt against the government of Prem Tinsulanond (Samudavanija 1982). A second strategy was to tightly control the number of cadets recruited for officer training. The Burmese practice of seconding officers also allowed the military to control the civil bureaucracy and fuse its interest with those of the military. President Win Min transferred the GAD from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the Office of the President in 2018. This transfer effectively brought the bureaucracy's highest echelon directly under the control of the government rather than the military (*The Irrawaddy* 2018). The NLD did, however, appoint senior retired air force officer U Min Thu to head the GAD after the transfer.

During the NLD-led government's term, the military was engaged in counter offensives against two major ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) that led to large numbers of casualties on both sides. The first of these was against the Kachin Independence Army (KIA) for control of strategic high ground near the Kachin Independence Organization's (KIO) headquarters of Laiza. There were intense battles in 2016 for control of such positions. The second major front was against the Arakan Army (AA) during its relocation from Kachin State. In that instance the battles were for control of territory in Chin and Rakhine States. The AA has strong support within the Rakhine Buddhist community and the inhabitants of the State have historically had center-periphery tensions against the central government. Then there was a third widely criticized and indiscriminate offensive in 2017 against the Arakan Rohingya Salvation Army that led to the displacement

of more than 730,000 Muslims as refugees to Bangladesh. These battles left the military in an uncompromising mood when dealing with the NLD and its refusal to convene the NDSC.

All these developments collectively pitched the military against the NLD-led government.² The proverbial straw that broke the camel's back was the extremely poor showing of the USDP in the November 2020 elections. The overwhelming popularity of the NLD a second time with an even higher victory margin clearly meant that the military would have had to endure another five years with a similar government with stronger legitimacy to boot. In the meantime, the military's hope of winning the polls through a political party had been dashed beyond salvation. It was under such circumstances that the NLD was unable to convene parliament in January 2021 with its senior leaders arrested. Subsequently, it was learned that Min Aung Hlaing sought the resignation of President Win Min but the latter had refused to. Soon afterwards, the military announced the coup citing widespread electoral fraud that was not investigated causing a threat to the country and Constitution.

Major Post-coup Developments—CDM, CRPH, NUG, and PDFs

The military coup was rejected by the general population at large. Early signs of resistance to the coup included street protests and the banging of pots and pans. When the military began to crack down on these protests, the CDM emerged. The CDM was led, in particular, by the health and education sectors, and large numbers of youth were involved in the Movement. As a result of the popularity of the movement, many services in the public sector became adversely affected. The imposition of wide-ranging sanctions by the international community led by the United States and the European Union in response to the coup has included restrictions on dual use technologies and targeting of senior military officers, members of their families, and local business cronies. There is some indication that the withdrawal of investments by large private sector companies, especially from the oil and gas sector, has had more impact on the military regime, which is accustomed to sanctions and international isolation (Patton 2023).

The SAC does have some major powers supporting it. Such countries include China and Russia, in particular, while geographically proximate states like India and Thailand have continued their bilateral relationship with Myanmar's post-coup military government. Such interactions help the SAC achieve some international recognition and diplomatic support. Both China and Russia have shielded Myanmar from criticism in international fora. China, that has always had a strong and multifaceted bilateral relationship with Myanmar that provides it with fossil fuels and hydroelectric power. China has also been the largest investor in Myanmar for a long time now and views the country as an important

part of its belt and road strategy in mainland Southeast Asia (Ganesan 2018). Additionally, Myanmar provides China with access to the Indian Ocean, which is regarded as strategically important given the challenges that it faces in the South China Sea with other major powers like the United States and Japan. The northern EAOs have a strong relationship with China and this is especially true of the Wa and Kokang ethnic groups. The United Wa State Army (UWSA), which leads the Northern Alliance comprising seven EAOs, has often sought China's assistance in brokering peace talks with the Myanmar military (Ganesan 2017). China has had a special envoy attending to Myanmar for some time now. In the past it was Sun Guoxiang who was replaced by Deng Xijun in 2022.

The NLD gradually put together a group of parliamentarians that served as the core of a government in exile. It was called the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) in reference to the local parliament. The CRPH, together with some EAOs, then went on to form the NUG which serves as the official government in exile (*Bangkok Post* 2021). The NUG maintains a shadow cabinet and issues statements regularly. It also has coordinators in many countries that are home to the Myanmar diaspora like Japan, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore. Members of the diaspora regularly meet and arrange to raise funds for the NUG. In early 2023, the NUG reported having raised \$100 million by March and had set a target of \$250 million for the year. Singapore is a major source of funding for the NUG where reportedly some 70 percent of funds are raised (Thazin and Campbell 2023). A member of the local Myanmar Club (author's interview, Singapore, December 25, 2022) mentioned how the bank assigned to receive the funds electronically was so overwhelmed with transactions that its website crashed. Apparently, many Myanmar workers including those holding jobs with modest wages like domestic helpers regularly contribute a significant portion of their salaries to support the NUG and its activities.³ Fundraising activities have included the sale of residential properties accumulated by the military and proposed future residences when the country is liberated from the SAC. Social media and word of mouth are said to be the main means of communication among members of the diaspora.

The liberalization of the telecommunications industry by the Thein Sein government has had a strong impact on the resistance to military rule. The accompanying digital revolution has allowed Facebook to become the dominant digital media platform against the SAC. Since Facebook is controlled from Singapore it is well beyond the reach of the SAC and has even banned Myanmar military pages from its platform. This technological instrument has strongly helped the local population and migrant workers abroad to share information and coordinate actions against the SAC.

In response to armed violence against the domestic population resisting the SAC, in May 2021 the NUG called for defensive warfare against the military. It then endorsed the preexisting PDFs. Since then, there has been a proliferation

of such groups all over the country and many of them regularly stage attacks against military convoys transporting soldiers, food, and fuel. The groups often have fancy names like Black Peacock, Cobra Column, Eagle Defense Force, Hawk Revolutionary Squad, Lion Commando Column, and Urban Owls. Animal names seem to be popular and many of them also reference their area of control and operation. The attacks have become much more sophisticated over time including the use of drones to attack military installations and camps.

A measure of the PDFs' success is the fact that the military has taken many casualties and mostly controls the major roads, towns, and garrisons while the PDFs and EAOs control the great majority of villages in their area of operation. This year (2023) has been designated as the year when the PDFs hope to score significant victories against the SAC and have begun offensive operations against military camps. The most intensive fights have occurred in Chin, Karen, and Kayah States and Magwe and Sagaing regions. Additionally, the armed struggle persists within the majority Bamar ethnic community. This is a rather new and important development since attempts to form Bamar armed groups have failed after 1988. Hence, this dynamic truly has the potential to provide a strong boost to interethnic collaboration against military rule. Such a united front has far greater potential to succeed in a country traditionally wracked by interethnic distrust and conflict.

Apart from such attacks, the PDFs also have urban units that regularly target prominent officials and appointees of the SAC. High profile targets have included the Deputy Governor of the Central Bank and the Deputy Director of the Union Election Commission (Than Thit 2023). Additionally, the PDFs have successfully managed to cooperate with some of the major EAOs to obtain training from them and collaborate on attacks against the military. Such groups have included the Chin National Front, KIA, Karen National Union (KNU), Karenni National Progressive Party, and their allied military groups. The SAC, on the other hand, relies on its militia units as well as armed groups (called Pyu Saw Htee) to engage the PDFs and control territory. It has also gazetted organizations resisting the SAC like CDM, CRPH, NUG, and PDFs as terrorist (Eleven Newsmedia 2021). The PDFs are not without their own internal problems and there have been accusations of the larger groups committing violence against smaller ones (Frontier Myanmar 2023). Additionally, many of them operate rather independently and are not always coordinated or in sync with the NUG (Lintner 2023). This problem of maintaining control and consolidating gains was flagged by interviewees who are involved in raising funds for the NUG (author's interview with NUG fundraiser, Singapore, March 4, 2023).

Civil Conflict, Casualties, and Displacement

For more than two years now Myanmar has been wracked by violence. Both the SAC and the NUG regard each other as enemies to be defeated through force of arms. In this regard, the consensus is that the window has closed for any sort of negotiated settlement. The United Nations (UN) Special Envoy for Myanmar, Noeleen Heyzer, openly made this judgement call after her last visit to meet with Min Aung Hlaing in March 2023 (Besheer 2023). In light of her inability to influence the ongoing negative political developments in Myanmar the UN announced that she will step down from her appointment when it expires on June 12, 2023. Interviewees from the Myanmar diaspora generally felt the same way and foresaw protracted conflict for the medium term.⁴ The military, to minimize its losses of personnel and equipment, has increasingly resorted to the use of fighter aircraft and attack helicopters to engage the PDFs and EAOs. The regular razing of villages perceived to be allied with the NUG has also led to significant displacement of civilians.

In terms of absolute numbers, a report from the Peace Research Institute Oslo indicates that at least 6,337 civilians have been killed since the coup in February 2021 (Min Zaw Oo and Tenneson 2023). Then there are internally displaced persons that the UN Office of Humanitarian Affairs estimates at approximately 1.8 million persons (*Eleven Newsmedia* 2023). There are an additional approximately 18,000 political detainees in the prisons, according to the Assistance Association for Political Prisoners, which keeps track of the numbers of dead and detained citizens. These numbers are staggering and keep increasing all the time. The delivery of humanitarian assistance to the displaced has also become an issue. The UN and Japan's Nippon Foundation has long aided displaced persons. The latter is the vehicle of Yohei Sasakawa who was appointed as the Special Envoy of the Government of Japan for National Reconciliation in Myanmar by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe in 2013 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan 2015). Since then, Sasakawa has been active with various efforts in Japan and, in late 2022, successfully helped reaffirm the truce between the AA and the Myanmar military that was orally agreed to in October 2020 before the election (Sai Wansai 2022).

The Association of Southeast Nations (ASEAN), which convened a meeting in Jakarta shortly after the coup in April 2021, came up with the Five Point Consensus plan that was aimed at the cessation of violence, consultations with all stakeholders, the delivery of humanitarian aid, and the appointment and visit of a special envoy representing the regional organization (to be discussed later). In fact, the attempted delivery of humanitarian aid after a long wait, to serve as an ice breaking gesture to Taunggyi in the Southern Shan States, failed after the convoy was attacked and had to abort the mission in May 2023 (*The Irrawaddy*

2023a). Thailand, which regards itself as the country most affected by the situation in terms of refugees and migrants, appointed its own special envoy and began brokering talks with the SAC in December 2022 at a meeting in Bangkok (to be discussed later). Thailand is also dependent on migrant labor and fossil fuels from Myanmar that are essential for its economy.

Collapse of Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement

During the democratic transition from 2011 onward, succeeding governments attempted to consolidate the peacemaking process with the EAOs. These attempts had been made on a piecemeal basis since 1988 when the military tried to stave off multiple challenges to its legitimacy. These challenges included the 8888 Uprising for democracy that was violently suppressed and the collapse of the Burmese Communist Party. The latter led to the formation of many EAOs representing the Wa and Kokang ethnic groups located close to the border with China. The Thein Sein government inaugurated the Myanmar Peace Centre in 2012 and appointed a lead negotiator to oversee the efforts. This attempt partly paid off when eight out of the sixteen EAOs that the government engaged in negotiations signed on to a Nationwide Ceasefire Agreement (NCA) in October 2015, just before the election. The NCA was celebrated with great fanfare in the capital Naypyitaw and many senior diplomats that included UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon witnessed the signing. The KNU that signed on to the NCA served as the anchor to the agreement which was regarded as a real breakthrough since it is a large EAO with a sizeable army that has engaged the military since the time of political independence. Nonetheless, other large and important EAOs like the KIA/O (whose bilateral ceasefire agreement collapsed in June 2011) and the UWSA (that opted out of the process) were not part of the NCA.

Then, after Suu Kyi's NLD-led government took control of parliament in 2016 it managed to add two more EAOs to the original list and increased the number of groups to ten. The Myanmar Peace Centre was then renamed the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre and Suu Kyi appointed her own personal physician, Dr. Tin Myo Win, as the lead interlocutor. However, little progress was achieved beyond the two additional groups that signed on to the NCA. In fact, the NCA was being sidelined even by the groups that had signed it since little progress was made and, under the NLD-led government, the military often dealt with the EAOs independently. Hence, unlike the previous government, the NLD's policies towards the EAOs were not coordinated with the military (Ganesan 2021). It then appeared as if there were three parties with independent positions in the process. The NCA itself was fraying, too, and KNU units were beginning to engage the military again in Karen State.

More recently, the KNU has openly called for an end to military rule in the

country (*The Irrawaddy* 2023b). This pronouncement is especially significant since the KNU anchored the NCA, as mentioned earlier. This development means that the NCA has effectively ended with the attendant consequences of renewed fighting. The KIA and the KNU are the two largest EAOs after the UWSA that has essentially argued for the continuation of its earlier bilateral ceasefire arrangement signed in 1989 with the collapse of the Burmese Communist Party. Additionally, both groups have been at the forefront of training for the PDFs and conducting joint operations with them. In this regard, members of the Bamar majority ethnic group are now cooperating with the EAOs against the military.

While the ongoing situation appears to have led to better relations between a Bamar majority that is opposed to military rule and the EAOs, how long or sustained such collaboration will last remains to be seen. The majority-minority divide is a very old and deeply ingrained one in Myanmar that has previously been exploited by the military.⁵ Nonetheless, at least for now, the PDFs appear to be benefiting from the experience and training provided by the EAOs, while the NCA has collapsed.

Likely Future Trajectory of Developments

As the situation stands at the time of writing, Myanmar is mired in deep conflict. The evidence thus far is that morale is high in the NUG and among members of the Myanmar diaspora abroad who support and fund it. For the first time in the country's history an EAO-led armed challenge to the military has evolved in Kachin, Kayah, Kayin, and Chin States. Magwe and Sagaing regions are also areas with strong resistance to the military together with parts of the Shan States. The sentiment that the citizens of the country do not wish to live under a military authoritarian regime appears strong. Those who have taken up arms as members of the PDFs have also learned to work alongside the ethnic minorities. With neither the NUG nor the SAC seemingly prepared to negotiate and bring an end to the armed conflict, the situation is likely to persist for the medium term.

Most members of the Myanmar diaspora who were interviewed are of the opinion that the SAC will try to remain in power at any cost. It was thought that unless the ground results indicate more than overwhelmingly a military loss in the fight against the PDFs, the SAC will not stand down from its policy of achieving its goals through armed violence. The SAC does have China and Russia for international diplomatic support. Additionally, both countries also supply the SAC and military with weapons. More recently, Russia has increasingly supplied Myanmar with fighter aircraft and attack helicopters that have been used when the military is involved in large scale attacks or to extricate its personnel from PDF and EAO attacks (Ganesan 2022). A senior interviewee (author's interview with NUG fundraiser, Singapore, March 4, 2023) noted that the strategic goal of

the NUG is to cut off the highway linking Yangon and Naypyitaw. The isolation of Naypyitaw together with its SAC-linked elite and families is seen as another situation under which the SAC may come to the negotiating table.

There are ongoing external efforts at mediation although it is unclear whether such efforts will be successful. The first of these efforts is coordinated by the ASEAN through its current chair, Indonesia. As early as April 2021, shortly after the coup, ASEAN leaders met with Min Aung Hlaing in Jakarta and signed on to the Five Point Consensus. Under the terms of this arrangement there was to be an immediate end to the conflict, negotiations between all stakeholders, the provision of humanitarian aid, the appointment of an ASEAN special envoy, and the visit of the special envoy to Myanmar. However, the Five Point Consensus has come to naught and previous special envoys from Brunei and Cambodia have been unable to meet with all the local stakeholders, including, in particular, Suu Kyi, who has now been sentenced to a thirty-three-year jail term for charges brought against her by the SAC. Both the SAC and the NUG have neither the interest nor the intention to work toward a ceasefire and negotiated settlement and are keen on a military victory. Consequently, ASEAN's early intervention has been unsuccessful with divisions among member states on how to deal with the situation (Rising and Cheang 2022). The organization's current chair, Indonesia, has pursued more quiet diplomacy and the country's President Joko Widodo and Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi claim to have succeeded in negotiating with all parties discreetly (Baharudin 2022). However, thus far no evidence of such success has emerged. In fact, an ASEAN aid convoy with diplomats from Indonesia and Singapore was attacked near Taunggyi in the Southern Shan States while attempting to deliver much needed humanitarian aid through the ASEAN Humanitarian Aid (AHA) Centre. A militia group allied with the SAC has been blamed for the attack and the mission was aborted.

There is a second ongoing attempt by Thailand to broker a negotiated settlement. This attempt began with a visit by the Thai Foreign Minister, Don Pramudwinai, to Yangon in November 2021 and the appointment of a special envoy, Pornpimol Kanchanalak, to coordinate the process. Since then, Thailand has organized meetings with Myanmar non-governmental organizations based in Thailand and Myanmar to broaden the contact base (Ganesan 2023). Perhaps Thailand, which is the most directly affected by the Myanmar conflict in the form of refugees and migrants, will be able to better deal with the situation.⁶ The country is also heavily reliant on fossil fuels from Myanmar, especially gas from the offshore Yadana field in the Gulf of Martaban. Labor from Myanmar is equally important in the agriculture and fisheries, construction, manufacturing, and service sectors.⁷ Hence, the spillover effect of the conflict has created a situation that requires a response. Additionally, Thailand has always preemptively dealt with situations affecting it in mainland Southeast Asia, like its alliance with the United States during the Second Indochina War to deal with the threat of

revolutionary communism from Vietnam. Then following the communist victory and United States withdrawal from the region in 1975, it aligned with China to secure an external guarantor to its safety and security (Paribatra 1987). Toward the conclusion of the Third Indochina War, it was again Thailand that launched a policy of friendship and economic development with Vietnam in 1988 under the civilian government led by Prime Minister Chatichai Choonhavan. Hence, the country has a long history of independently attending to its own national security interests. While the Thai policy treats both the SAC and the NUG as well as displaced Myanmar citizens fairly, it does confer legitimacy on the SAC, which is anathema to ASEAN. According to a Thai National Security senior adviser (author's interview, Bangkok, February 27, 2023), Thailand hopes to be able to reset its bilateral policy toward Myanmar on a more positive track like it did with Vietnam in the 1990s.

Potential Longer-Term Problems

Most members of the Myanmar diaspora interviewed appear confident that with the general support of the population at home and diaspora abroad it is simply a matter of time before victory over the SAC is achieved. Nonetheless, they do acknowledge that the victory will take time and even when achieved several serious problems will persist. The first of these, which is as old as the country itself, is territorial consolidation and control. Even if all the PDFs abide by the directives of the NUG to relinquish territorial control in favor of more centralized administration, it is unlikely that the EAOs will cede control of their territories. While a federal and less centralized structure may persuade some of the EAOs that are currently working alongside the PDFs, the groups that have remained aloof from the NCA, like the Wa and the Kokang, are unlikely to cede control. Those territories have evaded state control for a long time and are likely to continue to do so (Davis 2022). Hence, even optimistic interviewees acknowledge that the country may not retain its current territorial boundaries in the future. Both internal boundaries between states and regions and even international boundaries may be subjected to change.

The second major issue that needs to be addressed is the future of majority-minority relations between the ethnic Bamar and the others. Bamar hegemony has been a hallmark of previous governments, and while post-conflict settlement is likely to treat the minorities and their leaders better, many minority groups have deep and strong resentment against the Bamar for the suffering they have endured as lesser citizens without any meaningful autonomy in their states or homeland. This hatred had in the past been expressed even against Suu Kyi notwithstanding her general popularity within the country. Similarly, there have been accusations that some of the EAOs use Bamar members of the PDF as

fodder when engaging the military. While such accusations may not be true, they serve to highlight how minority perspectives are colored by their past experiences that will, in turn, bear on their future judgements and willingness to cooperate even within a federal structure. To many ethnic minorities and EAOs, federalism simply involves their ability to exert control over their own kind within a specified territory and retain their arms as well.⁸ Naturally, such a practice will simply be unacceptable since security and foreign policy has always been the prerogative of the central government even in the most liberal federal structural arrangements. Conversely, there is also emerging evidence of greater interaction and social cohesion between the Bamar majority and ethnic minorities in community-led efforts of coping with the post-coup situation (Aung Tun 2022).

The final issue that was mentioned in the interviews is the role of the military. While the SAC and military juntas of the past are reviled for their abuse of power there is acknowledgement that the military has a legitimate role to protect the country's territoriality and sovereignty against foreign states and interests. The need to construct a military that is subservient to a civilian government is viewed as a necessity but one fraught with problems given the military's past record of simply usurping power through the force of arms (author's interview with members of the Myanmar Club, Singapore, March 4, 2023). The mention of these problems does indicate some amount of foresight, although the focus of the NUG and the PDFs for now is to simply defeat the SAC. Afterall, such a scenario must first be obtained before there can be any form of a reconstituted state and state-society relations.

Conclusion

The 2021 military coup in Myanmar has led to widespread resistance and conflict in the country. There is now a parallel NUG government in exile that is determined to defeat the military junta in power. The NUG draws on elected representatives from the NLD and the EAOs. Since May 2021, at the urging of the NUG, armed groups called PDFs have sprouted all over the country. These PDFs have successfully engaged the SAC and its allied militias in armed conflict. In 2023 they have even started attacking military outposts and camps, leading to significant territorial control. The involvement of members of the Bamar ethnic majority in the resistance to military rule is a notable development and one that has not occurred since the failure of the 1988 student-led uprising. Military columns are regularly ambushed and attacked from the air through drones (Kyi Sin 2023). The military has responded in turn with violence that has included airborne attacks with fighter aircraft and helicopter gunships. The torching of villages that are perceived to be supportive of PDFs has led to widespread property damage. All in all, the ongoing conflict has led to many civilian

casualties and a staggering number of displaced persons. It has also led to the collapse of the NCA that was supposed to end ethnic insurgency.

There appears to be little incentive for either the SAC or the NUG to work towards a politically negotiated settlement of any kind. Both parties appear intent on achieving their goals through armed conflict. Consequently, the situation in Myanmar is closer to that of civil war and it is expected to be drawn out for the next three to five years. Efforts to resolve the situation politically through the efforts of ASEAN have been unsuccessful thus far. Thailand has initiated its own bilateral policy to bring about internal political reconciliation as well. The latter process is still ongoing and subject to recalibration depending on the new government that comes into power after the recently concluded national elections. Members of the Myanmar diaspora abroad are strongly supportive of the NUG and have helped raise funds for the armed efforts against the SAC. Nonetheless, there is no certainty which party will emerge victorious and how the conflict will eventually be resolved. For now, it would appear that, for all intents and purposes, the eventual outcome of the conflict will be determined by the Myanmar people alone. The post-conflict situation will certainly throw up new challenges associated with early statehood like territorial consolidation and sovereignty.

The Myanmar case confirms that the transition from military authoritarian rule to a democratic one is not unilinear and is subject to setbacks. In this regard, the trajectory is a familiar one witnessed in countries like Nigeria and Pakistan. In the Myanmar case democratic transition was thwarted in the main by structural constraints associated with the 2008 Constitution that was crafted by the military. Hence, structural conditions and constitutionalism were simply lacking in the case of Myanmar for democratic consolidation as argued by Pop-Eleches and Robertson (2015) and Davis (2017). Those constraints made it impossible for the NLD-led government headed by Suu Kyi to even attempt to amend the constitution to overcome them. The super majority of more than 75 percent of the parliamentary vote required for it was simply out of reach since the military that controlled 25 percent of the seats always voted as a bloc to protect its own corporate interests.

The widespread and determined resistance to the coup and the ongoing conflict between the military and its opponents in the PDFs and the EAOs may lead to the eventual displacement of the military from domestic politics. In this regard, the decade-long democratic interlude has unleashed a common desire for the return to democracy and away from military authoritarian rule. Hence, it is arguable that the country's political culture has been significantly altered in favor of democratization. It has undergone a transformation from an observer culture to a participatory one as Almond and Verba (1963) would have described it. Systemic changes arising from this transformation augur the potential to achieve democratization through negotiated settlement with a weakened or reformed

military. Additionally, there is no evidence to suggest that Suu Kyi will be part of any post-conflict settlement. This observation is on account of her age and the likely unwillingness of the PDFs and the EAOs to submit themselves to the sort of top-down micromanagement that she was frequently accused of in the past.

Acknowledgements

Funding for this article was provided by a Peace Research Project Grant from the Hiroshima Peace Institute of Hiroshima City University. The author would like to thank Michael Montesano and the two anonymous referees for their useful comments on earlier drafts of the article.

Notes

1. This opinion was first provided by a senior Myanmar scholar based in Yangon with access to high-ranking public officials. It was subsequently confirmed by an adviser to both the Myanmar Peace Centre and the National Reconciliation and Peace Center during an interview on December 26, 2019.
2. This rift between the military and the NLD was confirmed by a senior adviser to the Myanmar Peace Center (author's interview, Yangon, January 5, 2020). He noted, however, that the rift is never acknowledged in public.
3. It was mentioned that active funding by Myanmar migrant workers has allowed fundraisers to nudge the NUG into better coordination and improve their profile. Apparently, night life in Myanmar's major cities is robust enough to serve as a distraction for local youth in their opposition to the SAC (author's interview with Myanmar Club executive, Singapore, March 4, 2023).
4. This was the consensus of a dozen interviewees from the Myanmar diaspora based in Singapore, Thailand, and the United States who have actively participated in or closely monitored Myanmar's domestic politics.
5. This was the view of a Kachin medical doctor (author's interview, Bangkok, February 26, 2023) who arranged to treat refugees with assistance from the United States in the Thai border town of Mae Sot.
6. This was the view of a senior adviser to the National Security Council of Thailand (author's interview, Bangkok, December 30, 2022).
7. This was the view of two Thai academics (author's interviews, Bangkok, December 29 and 30, 2022 and March 3, 2023) who specialize in Myanmar and bilateral relations. One of them noted the intensely personal nature of relations between the military elites in both countries, including the relationship between Thai Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and General Min Aung Hlaing, while the other observed that Thai political elites underestimate the domestic resistance to military rule in Myanmar.
8. Most negotiators from the Myanmar Peace Centre under the Thein Sein government and the National Reconciliation and Peace Centre under the NLD-led government

admitted that EAOs will always retain arms as a fallback position. There is a strong absence of mutual trust between the EAOs and the military, and even during the democratic interlude, EAOs formed political parties have taken advantage of the situation to further their ethnic group interests rather than work toward complete political contestation through elections.

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Submitted: June 02, 2023; Revised: August 27, 2023; Accepted: September 01, 2023

