

Analysis - Keep the Streets: Coup, Crisis, and Capital in Myanmar

Sunday 21 February 2021, by [LEVENSON Zachary](#), [Soe Lin Aung \(Geoffrey Aung\)](#) (Date first published: 20 February 2021).

On February 1, the Tatmadaw – Myanmar’s armed forces – arrested State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and seized the reins of government, likely putting a halt to the country’s recent slide toward democracy. Spectre editor Zachary Levenson interviewed Geoffrey Aung (Soe Lin Aung), a Ph.D. candidate in anthropology at Columbia University, whose research focuses on the politics of infrastructure in and around Myanmar’s economic zones and trade corridors. Building upon his analysis published in *Chuang* the week of the coup [[1](#)], Aung reflects upon likely implications of the coup, the class composition of the resistance, and how we should understand these developments in relation to the longer trajectory of capitalist transition in Myanmar.

Zachary Levenson - Where are we now? What’s happened since the coup on February 1?

Geoffrey Aung - The new military government is now confronting mass resistance. From Myanmar’s major cities to towns across the country, we’re seeing large-scale work stoppages, street demonstrations, urban blockades, and general unrest. Medical workers and other public sector workers were among the first to organize work stoppages against the coup. Women-led labor unions from Yangon’s industrial zones were crucial in swelling demonstrations in the city center. In Yangon and other cities, neighborhood associations are sealing themselves off against police and military activity. Farmer protests have taken shape around the country. In the far north, when soldiers moved in to seize a power plant, they used live rounds to disperse protesters who had gathered to defend the plant. A protester died from a gunshot wound in Naypyidaw, the country’s capital. Two more died when soldiers attacked striking shipyard workers in Mandalay.

A defiant mood is balanced by a sense of foreboding. How long until the military truly begins a violent crackdown? The military has sought to control the information environment through a series of internet shutdowns; night-time raids to arrest dissidents have sown fear across the country; some 500 people remain in detention since the coup; and the government is reportedly building Myanmar’s own “Great Firewall.” While police officers have in many cases joined protests against the coup, military units certainly have not. Instead, they’ve taken up defensive positions in key protest sites in Yangon and elsewhere. For organizers and activists on the ground, the most pressing need is to keep the streets: to sustain mass defiance – while countering the military’s intimidation and cyber-security tactics. These are not easy tasks, but resistance to the coup continues to ripple across the country.

While coups always come as a shock, they’re often not completely unexpected. Can you give us a sense of how stable Myanmar’s democracy was after the military gave up some of its power in 2011 and Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD) won the 2015 elections? How unexpected were this month’s developments?

Discord between the civilian government and the military – never a particularly amicable relation even at the best of times – had been mounting most recently since the military began casting doubt on the national election results in November of last year. The situation escalated in late January

when the military's spokesman refused to rule out the possibility of the coup. But then the generals appeared to climb down from their threat when they later, only days before the coup itself, said they would act according to the law and uphold the constitution. So the coup did come as a shock against this backdrop. Most of us thought the disaster had been averted.

But it's right to ask how stable Myanmar's balance of power really was, or was not, over the past decade. And clearly it was not very stable. In my estimation,¹ the generals had become willing to share formal political power with a different class fraction – represented by the NLD – because of at least 3 factors. First, since the 1990s, the military consolidated its position in the country's emergent market economy, especially in resource extraction, heavy industries, and agro-industries, while military-affiliated companies and affiliates (the so-called “crony capitalists”) hugely benefited from the privatization of state assets. By 2011, the generals no longer needed such a strong formal political position in order to exert power more broadly in the country.

Second, the military understood that a formally civilian government would open the floodgates to more foreign capital, especially Western capital, since Western sanctions would largely be lifted (and they were). This would provide further opportunities for enrichment (and it did). Third, the military believed they could advance, and indeed legitimate, their position, at least to some degree, through electoral means – by way of their electoral vehicle, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP). These were the basic conditions for the military's tenuous, yet for a time mutually beneficial, alignment with the NLD's more liberal class fraction.

The generals miscalculated on the third point in particular. With the 2015 national election, which the NLD won overwhelmingly, it started to appear as if the ballot box might become a mechanism to further marginalize the USDP, and by extension the military, rather than being an opportunity for social legitimation. And then the NLD won even more convincingly in 2020. Moreover, the post-2011 economy performed well until around 2017, when the country took a major reputation hit – at least in the eyes of some – with the Rohingya genocide. In any case, the economic outlook turned grim [2]. Growth figures declined; Western businesses got cold feet; tourists began staying away; fuel prices increased, while the local currency depreciated; and major development projects stagnated. The NLD-led government also failed to make significant progress on peace talks with ethnic armed organizations (EAOs).

I don't think it's possible – at least not yet – to isolate one factor above all others as *the* cause that led the military to smash Myanmar's post-2011 political dispensation. But it is clear that structurally, an already tenuous arrangement was coming under increasing pressure in political and material terms – whatever the (overly analyzed, in my opinion) personal animus between leaders at the top of the military and the NLD. In short, the post-2011 alignment was historical. Once the conditions that sustained it began to fall apart, it frayed to the point of no return. From this perspective, the dramatic breakdown in civilian-military relations that followed the 2020 election was only the final piece of a larger process of structural disintegration.

How would you characterize resistance to the coup? What forms is it tending to take? And can you say something about its class, religious, and ethnic composition?

Resistance to the coup began with public sector work stoppages, mushroomed into major street demonstrations, and has displayed remarkable reach spatially (across the country) and indeed in terms of composition. The most visible form of resistance has certainly been the open defiance of the military in the street demonstrations of Yangon, Mandalay, Naypyidaw, and other cities and towns. These protests have mainly taken the form of massive blockades of urban centers. Tens of thousands of people have consistently gathered around Hledan Center and Sule Pagoda in Yangon, for instance, while similar if smaller occupations of intersections have marked street demonstrations

elsewhere too, such as Dawei in the far south. While Shwedagon Pagoda, in the past, has been a major site of protests, now the occupation of more centrally located urban spaces appears to be the core strategy.

We've also seen a marked shift towards blocking roads and disrupting trade – not just through these massive occupations, but also by leaving broken-down cars to clog up key intersections, small groups of protesters blocking highways, downed tree trunks laid across railroad tracks, and a road blockade at an important border trade point with China. This intuition about logistical vulnerability is one of the more productive aspects of the current resistance, in my opinion, not least as it leaves some plausible deniability for people who might or might not be in the streets – who can say oh, I'm not against the regime, I just couldn't come to work because the road was blocked.² The economic and the political merge as open defiance of the coup continues.

I should add there have also been roving protests – at least in Yangon – targeting UN offices, embassies, and some public sector employers. Being smaller and more mobile, these recall some of the “flash mob” and “be like water” modes of resistance we've seen in Hong Kong and Thailand, although the larger gatherings have received more attention. Regardless, we've seen multiple modes of resistance, some more direct, some less so – some appealing to a mythical international community (see below), some challenging the military more frontally.

There is a lot to say about the composition question. In brief, resistance now appears less tied to a singular kind of subject than, say, 2007 (the sangha³) or 1988 (students, in theory, though that uprising was actually far less student-driven than the official story suggests). This time, public sector workers stepped up early on, and garment workers were crucial in building up some of the first mass protests. Ethnic minority groups have been particularly visible both in Yangon and in minority areas themselves (outside of Myanmar's major lowland cities). LGBTQ groups have also been really active in the protests. Self-consciously farmer-led protests have emerged, too. And while monks have been active, they have not had a leading role per se.

A lot of discussion has centered on the role of Myanmar's millennials and Gen Z as being especially active, not least with quite a lot of witty, meme-oriented protest signs and slogans. Arguably, this resistance is the first in Myanmar that owes to a generation now raised with and on the internet – Facebook above all, in Myanmar – as broad access to the internet only really came about in the post-2011 period. Amid so much interest in the sort of networked, online-oriented repertoires of protest, however, I do worry that the crucial role of workers – from medical workers to the public sector more broadly, as well as garment workers, certainly – risks getting overshadowed.

Regardless, it would be a mistake to locate this resistance in a singular political subject, grounded in the working class or otherwise. Rather, we might see efforts to compose political struggle across difference – a strength coming not from a formal whole but the concatenation of many fragments. Here, people who do not necessarily share very much – drag queens and garment workers, or Zoomer meme makers and highland farmers – find themselves suddenly thrown together, trying to coordinate practically to bring down this regime. One thinks of unity in separation [3], revolution without revolutionaries [4], or perhaps these lines drawn from an entirely different setting [5]:

“Contemporary movements are not coalitions between pre-existing political interest groups or organizations. Rather, today's movements gather singular individuals in their singularity, without fusing them into a formal whole. While the crucible of the streets will always produce new practical formations, which could (we pray) seed crucial new lifeways over the long emergencies to come, it is useless to ask our movements to fuse them into homogeneity here and now. For the foreseeable future, strength will come not by unity, but as agility amidst chaos. We must acclimate to a situation in which diverse people share common experiences in the streets while assigning very different

meanings to them. The problem is not to gather all the atomic particles into a new mass subject, but how to develop a permeable and flexible space of action in which diverse bodies and desires can coordinate across their separation."

How would you characterize the NLD's primary base? Beyond individual voters, are there institutional sources of support? I'm thinking here about monasteries, but also potentially organized labor, neighborhood groups, and so forth.

The NLD is certainly overwhelmingly popular at the polls. But it's important to draw some distinctions. First and most obviously, the NLD is not as popular in ethnic minority areas as it is in Myanmar's lowland central regions, which is predominantly Burman (although it continues to perform better in ethnic minority areas than many people expect). Second, the NLD alienated much of Myanmar's formal civil society in the post-2015 period. The party regarded civil society as essentially encroaching upon the political space that it now claimed – rightfully and at last, in its own self-narration – fully for itself. Relatedly, the NLD also maintains at best tense relations with many of the student leaders from the 1988 generation.

And third, the NLD has not shown itself to be particularly adept in handling land politics, labor struggles, or the national peace process. So the party can't really claim very much institutional support in the political worlds of workers, farmers, civil society, or ethnic minorities. In fact, it is a party that has relatively little party infrastructure, and little in the way of external institutional grounding. Beyond the figure of Suu Kyi – a kind of personality cult at the apex – there is little more than the gerontocracy that directly surrounds her, that is, the "uncles" who round out the party's upper echelon. But the party doesn't necessarily need very much more than this – the figure of Suu Kyi is enough, electorally. With her at the top, the party's support at the polls continues to cut across differences in class in both urban and rural settings. While it sometimes seems, at least to me, like the party is doing everything it can to alienate much of the country – workers, farmers, ethnic minorities – the party's popularity remains enormous at the grassroots level.

What about the military? Does it have a base to which it appeals?

The military tried to build a mass base in the 1990s roughly on the model of Golkar in Indonesia, the state party that outlived Suharto's dictatorship.⁴ This was the Union Solidarity and Development Association (USDA), which transformed into the USDP to contest the elections of the last decade. The USDA could once claim, at least formally, immense membership numbers, something like one-third of all adults by the early 2000s. (For a lot of people, including many public sector workers, membership was obligatory.) Active in the emergent private sector, the USDA drew on explicit state support – and itself engaged in patronage politics at the local level – while developing a wide range of businesses both nationally and locally, with activities spanning gems, bus and train transport, import businesses, aquaculture, plantations, rice mills, and real estate. But the USDP has proven an abject failure in electoral terms, completely overshadowed at the polls by the NLD.

In my own work in southern Myanmar, I've seen USDP patronage networks operating to an extent around small and medium enterprises, with some more successful local businessmen choosing to continue supporting the USDP. Businesses active in heavy industries, resource extraction, and agro-industries also tend to operate within the USDP orbit. Otherwise there is the military itself, certainly a sizable institution. Its soldiers and their families provide some support to the USDP. But these together simply do not provide enough oxygen to the USDP as an electoral vehicle.

Myanmar has a long history of coups and military rule. Often we hear a narrative of unbroken stratocracy, prominently featuring the popular uprising of 1988, from which the

NLD was forged. But I suspect the history is a bit more complex. For example, there's a long leftist tradition in Myanmar, including Aung San Suu Kyi's father, the anticolonial hero who was central in founding the Communist Party of Burma; after his assassination, the consolidation of the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League (AFPFL) as the main ruling party under U Nu in Burma's early postcolonial period; the subsequent decades of General Ne Win's "Burmese Way to Socialism" under the Burma Socialist Programme Party (BSPP); and then, only after 1988, the turn away from the BSPP toward the junta formerly known as the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC). So should we understand Myanmar as a post-socialist country? As a longtime dictatorship? How might you characterize this history?

A version of Jameson's axiom seems important to me here: always historicize. In the early post-2011 period, certain institutions [6] and public intellectuals [7] carelessly flattened the preceding 50 years into a caricature - a period of stagnant authoritarian socialism. This gesture was highly political. It served to justify, and aimed to consolidate, a wholesale liberalization agenda, the embrace of predatory financial institutions, and passive accommodation to global capital. Thatcher-esque, it was a kind of TINA maneuver, as if given this one-dimensional past, there could be no alternative to rapacious liberal capitalism going forward. So rethinking Myanmar's political futures depends in part on reworking this image of the past.

Needless to say, this past is not one-dimensional. From independence to 1962, state socialism under U Nu was largely consistent with other socialist developmental states that had recently achieved independence. It was also specifically anti-Communist [8], geared in many ways towards winning the hearts and minds of citizens in the central state's struggle against the Communist Party of Burma's (CPB) insurgency. An attempt at radically overturning Burma's colonial political economy, this developmental state sought to Burmanize, nationalize, and industrialize its economy (its 3 key pillars), rejecting any dependence on primary commodity exports and the dominance of Indian and Chinese traders.

After the 1962 military coup, the Revolutionary Council - and later the BSPP - sought to radicalize this tripartite agenda even further. The generals aimed to consolidate a developmental regime that, still virulently anti-Communist, initially maintained friendly relations with the West - all while trying to avoid getting pulled into the Cold War politics then destroying many of its neighbors, from Vietnam to Indonesia. It wasn't until the late 1970s and early 80s that the failure of the BSPP's attempted industrialization paradigm - an extreme version of the import substitution industrialization (ISI) agenda that many states in Asia and Africa were then pursuing - could no longer be ignored. The 1988 uprising brought down the BSPP, after which SLORC, the reconstituted military government, began a highly state-mediated market liberalization program that dismantled socialism across the 1990s and 2000s.

Even in this thumbnail history, we can see that the 1990s and 2000s, too often seen as part of a static authoritarian past, were actually decades of decisive economic transformation - preconditioning the reforms of the post-2011 period. This transformation was also pursued in response to proletarian struggle from below in the form of the 1988 uprising (which again was hardly just a student uprising). And from 1962-1988, too, there are important differences between the early and later periods within that timespan: the crumbling of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), in which Burma once featured prominently; the disintegration of the CPB insurgency; and a growing shortage of foreign exchange that meant state economic enterprises - would-be lynchpins of Burma's socialist developmental regime - could ultimately no longer import the raw materials and machinery they needed.

Strictly speaking, Myanmar is post-socialist. And I would say so advisedly. This is because, contrary

to many analysts of Myanmar's BSPP period, I don't think the generals pursued socialism "in name only." I also don't think "state capitalism" would accurately describe this period, as the BSPP's own chief ideologist would eventually (mournfully) suggest. On the contrary, socialism here was not unlike actually existing socialisms elsewhere: an attempted programmatic transition that failed to transcend capitalist relations of production, and which maintained intolerable levels of exploitation and repression.

For those of us who might stake out a politics left of socialism, there is no need to hold out some notion of a better, purer socialism – this simply was socialism. And it failed due to historical conditions that led to the collapse of many other socialist regimes as well. Those historical conditions require study. I am attempting this in one of my current projects, an extended economic history of postcolonial Myanmar. But we also need a more radical political horizon, and for this we might need to let the dead bury the dead – while bidding goodbye to one-dimensional histories.

Is there anything worth salvaging in the Burmese leftist tradition? Perhaps from the antifascist period and the struggles of Aung San? Or is it better left in the dustbin?

I don't know that "salvage" is the word I would use. Obviously, it would be a mistake to think that one could reach into the past and disinter, dusted off, a readymade revolutionary project for the present. For me, there is not a lot of use in romantic appeals to leftisms past. However, it does make sense to me to trace out leftist genealogies in Myanmar's history, closely tracking openings and closures at various historical junctures – even if only to understand what is no longer possible today (and hence what might still be possible). Thus obviously as well, I reject the popular notion that in Myanmar, we tried leftism and it simply didn't work. No. For a time, a highly constrained version of socialism prevailed, but it became far too authoritarian by the time it collapsed. But it is politically dishonest and intellectually lazy to reject leftism in Myanmar more broadly – a position that prevails in right-wing historiography of political thought in Myanmar as well.⁵

In fact, in the decades preceding the 1962 coup – in the late colonial period and early postcolonial period – more independent, more creative leftist political visions flourished. One thinks of Thakin Po Hla Gyi, the Ogre, the militant organizer who led an oil workers' strike that anchored the left wing of Myanmar's liberation struggle. The strike linked urban student nationalists to rural workers' struggles over land, labor, and resources. The Ogre's famous pamphlet, *The Strike War* [9], called for revolutionary struggle across ethnic divisions against the colonial state.

Or the writer Banmaw Tin Aung, whose popular stories of the post-independence period advance a bottom-up, subaltern politics based on the self-organized struggles of Myanmar proletarians. And like other Communist movements in Asia and Africa, even the CPB sought a form of revolutionary struggle based not on the telos of an advanced industrial proletariat, but rather a proletariat – the *propertyless class* [10], in Burmese (*pyitsimé lutansà*) – grounded in the social worlds of workers and farmers (and more prominently the latter) in an overwhelmingly agrarian state. To dig into these histories is to find, often enough, signs of militant leftisms against the state, grounded in forms of proletarian self-organization. Certainly, there is much to reconsider and even reclaim here (carefully, not as a romantic salvage project), well beyond the authoritarian statism of BSPP socialism.

The coup comes at an interesting moment, one in which Aung San Suu Kyi has fallen from her erstwhile status as the West's latest Mandela-like figure. She is now disgraced as an apologist for genocide against the Rohingya population. Do you think there would have been stronger international condemnation of the coup - and a concerted defense of Suu Kyi - if not for this? Do you think this is why we aren't seeing more in the way of Western imperial intervention?

There is no doubt that Suu Kyi has fallen from grace in the eyes of Western powers. This is maddening in its own way – not because she deserves better, but rather because it demonstrates the hypocrisy of Western powers, whose own wars in the Muslim world for decades now have been waged in the name of liberalism. This is not a defense of Suu Kyi – on the contrary. If we understand liberalism as a historical project, then indigenous genocide, plantation slavery, and imperial plunder are absolutely internal to that project and, as Black and indigenous scholars remind us, remain integral to liberalism today. As I’ve put it elsewhere [\[11\]](#), the problem is not that Suu Kyi turns out not to be a liberal. The problem is that she is.

Still, I’m not sure Suu Kyi’s faltering status explains Western reactions to the coup. I am – forgive me – not old enough to remember how Western powers reacted to the last seizure of power in Myanmar in the wake of the 1988 uprising. But I’m not sure that, today, the West – alongside, say, UN agencies – could really offer anything more than empty words and crude gestures like sanctions, regardless of Suu Kyi’s status. That is, I’m actually not sure Western condemnation has been muted, if “muted” suggests something more could or should be done. In fact, I don’t know what more could be done short of concerted intervention, i.e. military intervention, for which there is zero appetite in a place of limited strategic value. Otherwise, there is much discussion of potential brokered negotiations – by foreign governments or the UN – to restore power to Suu Kyi’s government. So here too I don’t necessarily see Suu Kyi’s status getting in the way of attempts, however mild or misguided, to restore Suu Kyi’s status quo.

In different key moments in recent decades, China has played an interesting role, sometimes backing the junta, sometimes funding self-determination insurgencies, and sometimes supporting the NLD. In a recent piece for Chuang, you suggest that China is likely to keep playing a central role. Who is China likely to back here? And given escalating US-China tensions, do you think this could prompt the US to intervene? Or are they likely to stay out of it?

Quite a few Myanmar people are ready to believe that China is in some sense “behind” this coup (there is no evidence of this), or at least strongly supports it. China’s ambassador even went so far as to give a rare interview explicitly stating that the coup is “not what China wants to see.” [\[12\]](#) But the notion that China and Myanmar’s military are stalwart allies is simply untrue. On one hand, the Chinese government rarely comments upon political unrest in other countries, defaulting to a language of “internal affairs.” China also often vetoes UN action in the Security Council along these lines. Yet on the other hand – and hardly appreciated by Myanmar’s generals – China has backed insurgencies in Myanmar’s Chinese borderlands for decades, from the CPB insurgency to those of the armed groups that emerged after it collapsed. And the NLD government actually developed very strong relations with China, which drew the concern of the military.

So the situation is not as straightforward as many might think. But it’s also not necessarily so complicated. The Chinese government, state enterprises, and companies will simply seek to work with whomever is in power in Myanmar, not least given major Chinese investments in infrastructure in particular. They’ll aim to move these projects forward no matter what, and in my opinion it would be foolish to expect otherwise. But the coup does not place Myanmar in China’s camp, in some definitive sense – certainly not in a way that would lead to greater US intervention. The main weapon the US will wield is economic sanctions, unfortunately, which will be less about China and more about a blunt, self-aggrandizing statement against the regime.

More broadly, people always ask what “the international community” (read: mainly Western powers and the UN) can or should do now. In my opinion, the answer to this question matters far less than a lot of people would like to believe. If any serious blow will be struck against the new regime, it will come from mass resistance in Myanmar, not from the arrogance of the so-called international

community.

If we wanted to tell the story of Myanmar's capitalist transition, where are we now? Surely 2011 played a key role in incorporating ethnic minority elites into the ruling coalition. Has that alliance broken down? Are we likely to see (or are we seeing) capital flight? What now for capital, both domestic and international?

We have not yet seen dramatic capital flight – mainly just some moves to disengage with military-backed companies. The beer company Kirin, for example, has pulled out of its joint venture with Myanmar Economic Holdings (MEH) [13], 1 of the 2 major military holding companies formed in the 1990s. But inasmuch as the military has dashed its alignment with the more liberal fraction of Myanmar's ruling class, the link between Myanmar and Western capital is now far more tenuous than before. It is reasonable to expect at least some companies to pull away and some investors not to invest.

It always bears repeating, however, that with the main exception of the French oil company Total, the largest sources by far of foreign capital during Myanmar's long capitalist transition – some 30 years now since the early 1990s – have consistently been East and Southeast Asia, not Europe, the US, or even Japan (until somewhat recently for Japan, and still in a somewhat restricted manner). China, Thailand, and Singapore loom largest here, from small and medium enterprises to larger enterprises and from the Burman lowlands to frontier capitalism in the borderlands. It would be a surprise to see serious inter-Asian capital flight as a result of the coup; the core conditions of capital accumulation will largely remain in place. As well, since frontier capitalism has long been driven by neighboring Asian capital, the incorporation of ethnic minority elites into this capitalist transition appears set to continue [14], even with discontent now surging against the coup among popular classes in the borderlands.

Otherwise, Myanmar's capitalist transition continues to undermine semi-subsistence agriculture in the country's vast rural areas, not least through widespread dispossession of land. Low-wage, informal, precarious employment continues to expand in larger and smaller urban centers. Plenty of Myanmar's rural and urban working poor continue to seek out employment as hyper-exploited migrant workers in neighboring countries, especially Thailand. In the absence of dramatic Asian capital flight (again, highly unlikely), there is no reason to expect a serious departure from these conditions of accumulation. Increasingly, Myanmar's rural working classes – the largest segment by far – are facing a situation where their land is needed, but their labor is not. Writ large, the story of Myanmar's capitalist transition is the story of this emergent surplus population. This is a story that ties in to deindustrialization across the overdeveloped world, as well as falling shares of industrial employment in much of Asia, Africa, and Latin America.⁶

What are the prospects for another chance at democratization in the near future? Given that Aung San Suu Kyi is likely finished, is the NLD likely to play that role? Or are we seeing the emergence of new forces?

In my opinion – for better or worse – I think it is too early to say Suu Kyi is finished. The NLD also retains enormous popular support. But resistance to the coup has pushed beyond any idea of simply restoring the NLD's status quo (even though unfortunately some believe restoring Suu Kyi should be the goal of mass struggle) [15]. Certainly, a new composition of forces is taking shape in cities and towns across the country, and it is not enough to say this is a movement in defense of Suu Kyi and the NLD. Prediction is always difficult, though.

Some suggest that the resistance struggle is so strong that it will end not only this military regime but even the possibility of military coups in the future in Myanmar [16]. I find it hard to marshal so

much optimism. Others argue that the military will clearly win [17], not by way of massive bloodshed but through a more patient strategy of waiting for the protests to die out, picking off leading activists during night-time raids, and continuing night-time internet blackouts to give cover to those raids and better position troops around urban centers. This is another possibility, no doubt.

Though advancing opposite predictions, both of these positions implicitly accept the only thing I would really insist on: that the balance of power going forward depends most on mass defiance of the new regime in the streets, whether through urban occupations, seizing on logistical vulnerabilities, or strategies we've not yet even seen. Can we maintain this resistance? How can we keep our friends and comrades in the streets? How do we hold onto this power, and claim a different political future? Every day, people across the country are flooding the streets, looking around, and asking each other these questions. The future depends on their answers.

We will see. We will see together.

P.S.

- Jacobin. February 20, 2021:
<https://spectrejournal.com/keep-the-streets-coup-crisis-and-capitalism-in-myanmar>
- Zachary Levenson teaches sociology at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro. He is an editor of Spectre and is currently completing his first book, *Delivery and Dispossession: Land Occupation and Eviction in the Post-Apartheid City*.

Footnotes

- [1] Available on ESSF (article 56898), [Notes on a Coup: An overall analysis – The time for resistance is here](#).
- [2] <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/the-gloom-about-myanmar-economy>
- [3] <https://endnotes.org.uk/issues/4>
- [4] https://endnotes.org.uk/other_texts/en/endnotes-onward-barbarians
- [5] <https://illwilleditions.com/rhythm-and-ritual/>
- [6] <https://ideas.repec.org/p/tuf/tuftec/0797.html>
- [7] <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/05/opinion/myanmar-needs-us-support-for-reform.html>
- [8] <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.5367/sear.2013.0177>
- [9] <https://www.burmalibrary.org/en/myanmar-literature-project-working-paper-no-1011-the-strike-war>
- [10] https://www.academia.edu/24486547/Rethinking_Myanmars_Left_Intellectual_History_The_S

[11] See, available on ESSF (article 56901), [Rohingya persecution \(Western Myanmar\): Three Theses on the Crisis in Rakhine](#).

[12] <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-myanmar-politics-china-idUSKBN2AG1AA>

[13] <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-55944643>

[14] <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00472336.2013.764143>

[15] <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/15/opinion/myanmar-protests.html>

[16] <https://asiatimes.com/2021/02/a-coup-that-could-end-all-coups-in-myanmar/>

[17] <https://asiatimes.com/2021/02/why-myanmars-military-will-win-in-the-end/>