

Myanmar

Statement: Against the military order, solidarity with the peoples of Myanmar!

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Latest news: on Sunday 28 February, riot police and soldiers fired, often indiscriminately, on the population in many parts of the country, killing, according to the Burmese daily The Irrawady, at least 13 people and seriously injuring many others (provisional report). This is a concerted action to break the movement of civil disobedience. A new wave of arrests is under way: more than 830 people are reportedly detained or wanted. On Monday 1 March, the arrests continued, but the army does not seem to have renewed the intense attacks of the previous day, in the face of demonstrators building barricades to protect their neighbourhoods. A new stage has been reached in the repression, which makes the strengthening of international solidarity all the more urgent. 1 March 2021



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The Burmese army (Tatmadaw) did not conquer power for the first time during the putsch of 1 February 2021 but has, on the contrary, occupied the heart of power continuously since 1962. Nor was the putsch the product of a simple struggle between military factions, as was the case in the past, even if it serves the political ambitions of Chief of Staff Min Aung Hlaing who reaches retirement age this year. The putsch largely constitutes a “preventive coup” in the face of a political situation that has grown out of control. Burma is experiencing a deep socio-economic and political-institutional crisis reflecting the scale of the upheavals taking place in society, as well as the impact of the health crisis caused by the Covid-19 whose management by the regime has been catastrophic.

Because they had not grasped the extent of these upheavals, Tatmadaw’s leaders probably did not expect the immense movement of civil disobedience, initially largely spontaneous, which the putsch sparked. The previous mass mobilization against the military dictatorship, borne in particular by the student movement and civil servants, dates back to 1988 and was crushed in blood by the regime. Today, the mobilization seems even broader. Almost all social strata are active in dissent, as are most components (nationalities) of the multi-ethnic Union of Myanmar. It has quickly adopted a specific framework for action, the Civil Disobedience Movement (CDM), a new development compared to 1988.

Following the 2015 elections, largely won by Aung San Suu Kyi’s National League for Democracy (NLD), a (very unequal) power-sharing agreement was reached the following year between the army

and Suu Kyi, which was supposed to initiate a “peaceful democratic transition”. The putsch of 1 February sanctioned the failure of this transition. However, during this period, civil society was able to strengthen itself and gain new experiences, amplifying a dynamic initiated a decade earlier, following the country’s economic opening, with the development of industrial wage-earners often made up of young women, trade unions (particularly in the export-oriented garment sector), associations and NGOs, a critical press, and the holding of elections. Ties of international solidarity have been forged, and the fight for social and democratic rights has gained legitimacy. It should be noted, however, that the NLD has tried to direct these movements for its own benefit solely on the electoral field and that its government has adopted laws restricting freedoms.

The conflict between Aung San Suu Kyi and the army leaders did not primarily centre on issues of general political orientation. The military certainly suspects Beijing of having financed the NLD election campaign. They have fought and will probably continue to fight national movements that have received aid from China. However, they have to deal with their big neighbour, which is investing massively in the country, developing infrastructure, particularly for the construction of a deep-water port in the Rakine (Arakan) State. For Xi Jinping, Burma is of strategic importance: it constitutes a “corridor” allowing it to access the Indian Ocean, bypassing the Strait of Malacca, which could be closed to it in the event of a regional conflict.

The tragedy of 2017 demonstrates that the crisis between the NLD and the General Staff did not play out on this issue, quite the contrary. Under the aegis of General Min Aung Hlaing, the military and paramilitaries attacked the Rohingyas, a predominantly Muslim population that suffered a terrible massacre, in order to facilitate the establishment of Chinese and Indian interests on their territory. The extreme violence of the persecutions caused the mass exodus of 730,000 members of this community. Far from denouncing the killings, Aung San Suu Kyi - yesterday’s Nobel Peace Prize winner! - has campaigned, including in the international arena, to defend the genocidal regime tooth and nail, losing all democratic and humanitarian credibility. Indeed, just like the core of the military regime, Suu Kyi espouses Bamar (Burma’s majority population) ethno-nationalism, which permeates their conception of the Multi-ethnic Union, and has shown no consideration for the Rohingyas whose name she refused even to pronounce. In the ordeal, the Rohingyas have received no support from the Union’s Nationalities.

In fact, the arm wrestling between Aung San Suu Kyi and Min Aung Hlaing has taken place on the institutional level. The 2016 compromise did not settle the issue of constitutional reform. The 2008 constitution gives the army 25% of the seats (designated by the general staff and not elected) in both the parliament and the senate. A minimum of 75% of the votes is required to amend it. Unelected legislators, along with their allies, are able to block any amendment that would go against their interests. In addition, while the presidency of the state returns by right to a civil personality, the junta has introduced a specially drafted clause in the constitution to prevent Aung San Suu Kyi from acceding to this post: people with a spouse or children of foreign nationality (which is her case) cannot run for it. She was thus only “de facto” Head of State, as a Councillor, not in title.

In the free elections of November 2020, the NLD won an overwhelming success (83% of the vote) at the expense of the military party. On the strength of her successive electoral successes, Suu Kyi was in a position to demand the unblocking of the institutional situation, which the General Staff and Min Aung Hlaing refused, even though no amendment to the Constitution could be adopted against their will thanks to the quota of unelected seats they enjoyed in parliament. Increasingly illegitimate, the junta resorted to a preventive coup.

A sign of the new times, resistance to the putsch immediately took on a massive dimension. Young people are once again at the forefront of the struggle, including young people in pre-university education. This generation - Gen Z - is very different from the one that carried the 1988 mobilization.

Particularly open to the world, mastering modern modes of communication, highly inventive and reactive, it integrates the same forms of action as its counterparts in the region, particularly in Thailand, from street theatre to the symbol of the three fingers pointing to the sky, in reference to the series of novels and movies *Hunger Games*. The change of period is particularly evident here, as the country had long been kept isolated by the military regime.

Likewise, health care personnel, civil servants, teachers, journalists, public and private employees, garbage collectors, firemen, entrepreneurs and shopkeepers also dissented. The whole of society is concerned. The Confederation of Trade Unions of Myanmar (CTUM) called a general strike on 8 February, affecting many military-owned enterprises. The movement has spread to the peasantry, destabilized by the flow of foreign investment. Local communities oppose mining projects or dam construction. Among the components that play a particularly significant role in this mobilization are Gen Z, the 88 generation elders and the trade union movement, who cooperate in the Civil Disobedience Committee (CDM). Advocating active non-violence, they conduct parallel strikes as well as “fluid” actions or mass rallies. The CDM helps in particular to organize solidarity with strikers who find themselves without income. Another component of the resistance is the NLD, whose cadres are systematically targeted by repression. Mobilizations in Bamar country often take place under the League’s flags and the portrait of Aung San Suu Kyi.

Dissent movements are emerging in most nationalities. Without trusting Suu Kyi, a Bamara ethno-nationalist, they see in the coup an increased danger of military intervention against them. Since the issue of constitutional reform is on the agenda, they put forward their own demands, raising the question of genuine federalism. The rights of nationalities are a key issue for the future of the Union of Burma.

The generation of senior officers at the head of the army does not have the same training as that previously relied on by the Burmese dictatorship. It runs two large conglomerates whose benefits depend on regional trade, pillars of “Khaki Capitalism”, as well as the lucrative trade in jade and other precious stones, narcotics and timber. They probably thought (rightly) that their Asian neighbours, the chambers of commerce and the transnationals would accommodate the coup. However, the power of the disobedience movement is such that Burma’s economic partners (with a few exceptions such as China) had to take it into account. The TNCs, in particular, are afraid to face boycott campaigns, as in the past.

The junta tested police repression, which resulted in five victims. It arrested more than 700 people. It showed its muscle by bringing the army out of the barracks. This only served to radicalize the protest. The junta now seems to be playing for time, hoping that the movement will be exhausted, because of the terrible impoverishment of the population. It is seeking to divide the opposition (co-opting certain personalities to a civilian government). The geographical extension of crony capitalism allows it to co-opt members of the local elite. It is also making agreements with a few representatives of different nationalities. It promises (controlled) elections to appease foreign governments. But it cannot be excluded, however, that one day the junta will opt for massive, bloody repression.

In these difficult conditions, the Fourth International affirms its total solidarity with the great movement of civil disobedience in progress, whose scope, commitment and dynamism it salutes.

* It demands the unconditional release of all political prisoners.

* It supports nationalities in the defence of their rights.

* It calls for the repeal of all repressive laws (particularly in the area of cyber security) which allow repression to take place without hindrance; the protection of demonstrators and strikers; respect for freedom of expression and the press, freedom of association and trade union rights...

* Burma's participation in international organizations, starting with ASEAN, must be suspended until democratic elections have been held and a civilian government has been formed, free of military tutelage.

* The military owns two huge conglomerates, the Myanmar Economic Corporation (MEC) and Myanmar Economic Holdings Limited (MEHL). All cooperation with these conglomerates must be halted, and the overseas assets of members of the junta and their allies must be frozen. Products from the military controlled industries must be boycotted.

* The conditions for broad constitutional reform must be met. A simple return to the situation before 1 February makes no sense: the army was already at the heart of power, it could and would again be able to block any democratic transition.

* Regional (Thailand...) and international experience shows that the general trend towards the hardening of authoritarian regimes comes up against popular revolts capable of winning significant victories. The Burmese people immediately received the support of the informal Milk Tea Alliance, active in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Burma and Thailand. The time has come to affirm a new internationalism based on solidarity!

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International Committee of the Fourth International

P.S.

• <https://fourth.international/en/510/asia/298>