

Myanmar military tries 'divide and rule' in bid to cement power

Tuesday 16 February 2021, by [FISHBEIN Emily](#), [Kyaw Hsan Hlaing](#) (Date first published: 15 February 2021).

Ethnic minorities say they feel betrayed by politicians who have taken positions with the military's State Administration Council.

Since seizing power from the elected government led by Aung San Suu Kyi on February 1, Myanmar's military, known as the Tatmadaw, has been working to entice rival ethnic political parties into its new administration, in a sign of the divide-and-rule tactics it has long used to control the country.

Saw Mu Daw*, an ethnic Karen youth in the central Ayeyarwady Region, feels betrayed by the ethnic party he once supported.

Leading up to national elections in November, he and his friends went door-to-door campaigning for Mahn Nyein Maung of the Kayin People's Party, who was running for a seat in the national legislature.

Mahn Nyein Maung lost, but he has now joined the administration of the new military government.

"After he was listed under the new State Administration Council (SAC), [my friends and I] didn't dare to go out because we were so ashamed," said Saw Mu Daw. "Before the election, I wholeheartedly supported him, but I feel like he betrayed our Karen people."

So far, four ethnic party leaders who competed against the National League for Democracy (NLD) and were not aligned with the Tatmadaw's proxy party have accepted positions in the new military administration, of whom one has since resigned from his party. The SAC was formed the day after the Tatmadaw arrested State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and dozens of elected party officials and declared a one-year state of emergency.

Since then, mass protests have erupted across the country.

Hundreds of thousands have demonstrated and government workers across every sector have gone on strike. With few allies, the Tatmadaw has swiftly sought to win the favour of ethnic parties whose constituents tend to have strong dissatisfaction with the NLD.

"We want benefits for all people"

Like many people from Myanmar's diverse ethnic nationalities, Saw Mu Daw supported the NLD during national elections in 2015

Many, including the Karen, had [hoped the NLD would advance their cause](#) after decades of fighting for self-determination under a federal system.

The hope was not unfounded: Leading up to the 2015 elections, the NLD had pledged to advance peace with ethnic armed organisations and to reform a 2008 military-drafted constitution. But it was not to be.

"We strongly supported the NLD, but we didn't get anything back from them," said Saw Mu Daw. "That's why in the 2020 elections, we believed in our Karen people."

His dislike of the NLD, however, did not convince Saw Mu Daw that the Kayin People's Party, one of several Karen ethnic parties, would represent the Karen people by joining the military administration. "We want equality. We don't want benefits for only a few people; we want them for all people," he said.

Since the coup, the majority ethnic Bamar, thought to make up more than two-thirds of the country's population, have largely focused their protest demands on freeing Aung San Suu Kyi and senior NLD officials and restoring the elected government.

Many non-Bamar ethnic people, in contrast, are demanding the overhaul of the 2008 constitution in place of one which is based on federalism.

Even though they share a desire to bring down the military government, many feel that the coup underlines a problem between the NLD and Tatmadaw, and overlooks ethnic peoples' desire for federalism.

"Currently, I think Bamar and Bamar are fighting. They shout "People", but it doesn't represent the whole public...They shout "Democracy", but what kind of democracy do they mean?" asked Au Non,* an ethnic Mon youth.

On February 7, the Mon Unity Party (MUP), one of two large ethnic Mon parties, accepted the Tatmadaw's offer to join the SAC.

The selected representative, Banya Aung Moe, told the local Mon News Agency that "no one accepts the military dictatorship," but that the party needed to "find a political solution at the political table for the federal union that the ethnic nationalities want."

He added that the party made its decision "by reviewing the attitude of the previous NLD government toward the Mon people."

Aun Non, who has been protesting with fellow Mon youth in Yangon against the coup, despises the Tatmadaw and looks with suspicion at its advances towards the Mon Unity Party.

"I think they're trying to play the Mon party by focusing on Mon nationalism," he said.

Nonetheless, Au Non supports the MUP's decision to join the new military administration. "If the military succeeds in this coup, having a position is good, because we will be playing under the rules of the military constitution," he said.

"The military is powerful in Myanmar; therefore, joining with the military could be a strategy to give Mon people hope of federal democracy and self-determination. For that reason, I support the Mon Unity Party joining with the military."

Thirty-one-year-old Mi Hong Chan, in contrast, firmly rejects the MUP's decision.

"They should be standing with the other elected members of parliament and condemning the

military coup, but now, they are acting like cowards,” she said. At the same time, she acknowledges the party’s rationale for accepting the seat. “I feel as if we are being betrayed, but it’s also somewhat understandable. They were not prioritised or even given a chance by the NLD...[the NLD] had the attitude of winner-takes-all; it also became like a dictatorship.”

‘Using us’

Perhaps the fiercest opposition to the NLD in recent years has come from Rakhine State, in the country’s far west.

In 2015, the Arakan National Party won more seats than any ethnic party across the country and overwhelmingly defeated the NLD in the state.

The party’s popularity fell further when the president appointed an NLD party member to the position of Rakhine State Chief Minister on coming to office in early 2016.

Animosity towards the NLD among Arakanese, also called Rakhine people, has increased even more in the past two years, which have seen [intense armed conflict](#) between the Arakan Army and the Tatmadaw.

The fighting has displaced more than 200,000 civilians, who have also experienced indiscriminate air raids, arson and numerous other human rights abuses.

Although the Tatmadaw committed the attacks, the NLD had given the order in early 2019 to “crush” the Rakhine rebels, and in June of that year also imposed internet restrictions affecting more than one million people across much of the state.

Leading up to November’s elections, a government-appointed election commission [cancelled voting](#) across large parts of the state, disenfranchising nearly three-quarters of eligible voters.

Since coming to power, the Tatmadaw has jumped on the opportunity to use its power to try to win over the Arakanese people. On February 2, it lifted internet restrictions in Rakhine; 10 days later, high-profile Arakanese political prisoners were among [thousands released in an amnesty](#).

On February 2, ANP spokesperson Aye Nu Sein accepted a position with the SAC and two days later, the ANP released a statement announcing that it would work with the Tatmadaw to resolve certain crises in the state.

An ANP Central Executive Committee member, who requested his name be withheld, told Al Jazeera he soon plans to resign from the party.

“The ANP may think they can do something for the Arakanese people if they accept a position under the Military Council. It’s a huge risk,” he said. “The military is using us for the short term, but there won’t be benefits for the Arakanese people.”

On February 7, 47 Arakanese civil society organisations released a joint statement urging the ANP to cancel its decision and called on all parties, organisations and individuals not to cooperate with any administration that lacks political legitimacy and was formed without the people’s consent.

“Previously, I thought I wanted the ANP to represent the Arakanese people toward a federal union. I realise now that the party that represented me is fake,” said Aye Mrat Kyaw, director of the Arakan Civil Society Organization Network, one of the statement’s signatories.

Although Aye Mrat Kyaw does not support the NLD government, she expects the situation for Arakanese people to be much worse under the military. "All people must stand as citizens without holding onto their parties," she said. "All people need to realise our common enemy."

**Pseudonyms have been used for Saw Mu Daw, Au Non and Mi Hong Chan at the interviewees' request due to the crackdowns on freedom of expression under the new military government.*

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