

A New Myanmar? - “The creation of a Federal Democracy remains a distant possibility”

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More than two months after the coup d'état in Myanmar, the military has not yet managed to take full control of the state beyond its monopoly on violence. In response to a massive civil disobedience movement which has paralyzed the economy through strikes in most key sectors, the Tatmadaw (as Myanmar Armed Forces are known) is unleashing all its fury on protesters, aiming to terrorize the population into submission. Over 700 civilians have been killed so far. Meanwhile, pundits and the United Nations are warning that the country risks descending into a civil war and becoming a 'failed state'.

There is a certain historical myopia in those statements: Myanmar never had a 'functioning state'. The army had been waging several civil wars against the ethnic minorities living in the country's borderlands since its independence in 1948. Now the Tatmadaw is bringing to Myanmar's heartlands - where the Bamar majority live - the brutal tactics it has been using for decades in those wars, making little to no distinction between armed combatants and civilians. Yet the violence has a different purpose depending on who is at the receiving end: in carrying out their military operations, soldiers kill Bamar for what they do (opposing its rule); they kill members of those ethnic minorities regarded as 'national races' for what they are (as part of a project of political domination and cultural assimilation); and they kill the Rohingya (widely regarded as foreign interlopers from Bangladesh) simply for being in the country. In response to this shared experience of repression, many Bamar protesters are developing a new sense of solidarity with the ethnic minorities - at times even including the Rohingya - while ethnic minorities are joining the civil resistance movement in states like Kachin, Chin and Kayin.

As the repression continues, very few believe the assurances made by the State Administration Council (SAC) - the new junta led by the Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing - that they will hold elections after a year or two and restore the 'discipline-flourishing democracy' that was designed by the previous ruling junta and launched a decade ago. The Tatmadaw's experiment with democracy is effectively dead. If the military prevails, any return to a semblance of democracy is likely to give even more powers to the generals - who already enjoyed full autonomy from civilian oversight, 25 percent of seats in parliament and control over the three key security ministries under the 2008 Constitution. Moreover, no one in the civil disobedience movement is willing to accept a return to the status quo. The opposition of ethnic minorities to the country's centralized model remains particularly unshakeable.

That status quo was a fragile pact between two Bamar-dominated elites - the military and the old pro-democracy camp led by Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD) - which unraveled after the election in November last year and came to a definitive end with the putsch on 1 February. The causes of that unraveling are still unclear, but after ten years of military-guided democracy and five years of Suu Kyi's government, it has become apparent that the differences between the two elites are not ideological. Both have fundamentally similar visions for Myanmar, from the question of national identity (most dramatically excluding the Rohingya) and national unity

underpinned by a sense of Bamar supremacy, to a neoliberal model of 'progress' that ignores the poor masses and preserves the inequalities of the extractive economy, largely controlled by the generals and their cronies. Tensions between the NLD and the Tatmadaw, both of which claim ultimate legitimacy to rule the country, are about power – not about what to do with it.

Throughout the transition, Aung San Suu Kyi's NLD strategy of engagement with the military had the effect of depoliticizing large swathes of Burmese society, especially the emerging middle classes: she convinced many of her supporters that unpredictable participatory politics could only hinder her attempts to assuage the generals. But the political opening created by the coup also prompted the emergence of new social movements that the NLD had mostly ignored: farmers organizing to fight against large-scale evictions and trade unions striking in the industrial areas for better working conditions. It is not by chance that the latter are at the forefront of the civil disobedience movement in cities like Yangon or Mandalay. Now, the conflict between elites that led to the events of 1 February has evolved into a war between the military and most of the population. There is much more at stake than releasing Suu Kyi and her party's elected leaders.

It remains to be seen how long the anti-coup movement can endure the brutal repression of a well-armed Tatmadaw. As the possibility of a rebellion within the military becomes more distant by the day, given its strong esprit de corps, the only chance to tip the balance is the creation of a unified front of ethnic guerrillas. Such forces, combined with the ongoing protest movement in central Burma, would seriously overstretch the Tatmadaw. A government in hiding formed by NLD MPs elected in November – the Committee Representing the Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH) – is already engaged in negotiations with the ethnic armed organizations to form a 'Federal Army'; but uniting them would require overcoming historic distrust that runs much deeper than the divisions created by the coup.

The main source of conflict in Myanmar since independence from the British in 1948 has been a nation-building project imposed by the Bamar at the centre on reluctant ethnic minorities in the periphery. This is predicated on the return to a pre-colonial past in which the 'national races' lived in unity, according to a largely fictitious Bamar-centric official historiography. The colonial period was seen as a rupture in that harmony, which would be restored after independence. And a rupture it was, but in a very different sense. The British put the territory which they designated Burma under a single political authority for the first time in history; but what they united by doing this they also separated by establishing a distinction between direct rule in central Myanmar and indirect rule in the borderlands – classifying and dividing groups whose boundaries were previously fluid. The colonial period thus partitioned the country's ethnic groups, who had very different experiences of that formative period. As such, when nationalism emerged at the beginning of the 20th Century, there was not a common struggle against the British that could coalesce into a multi-ethnic Myanmar nation.

After independence a democratic period gave some autonomy to the minorities, but the project of nation-building was mostly an affair of Bamar elites, suspicious of the minorities who they saw as collaborators with the colonial overlords. Even before the general Ne Win took power in 1962, inaugurating five decades of military rule, this state-building project was taken up by the Tatmadaw against the backdrop of a permanent state of war, as it fought off the Bamar-dominated Communist Party and several ethnic insurgencies. That project intended to expel the putative foreigners that arrived during colonial times: the Indian diaspora of laborers, businessmen and colonial civil servants in central Myanmar, and the Rohingya (whose precolonial roots in Rakhine were denied). Most of the Bamar population were either indifferent to those conflicts or tacitly adhered to the ethnicist conception of the nation, even as they resented military rule.

This project was unaltered when Ne Win was overthrown during an uprising against his regime in

1988, only to be replaced, after killing thousands of protesters, by a military junta that rejected his 'Burmese way to Socialism'. In this emerging capitalist economy of the 1990s, the Tatmadaw signed a series of ceasefires with some armed groups without reaching a permanent political settlement with any of them. They also managed to co-opt the economic elites of some of the ethnic minorities to partake in the plundering of the rich natural resources in their areas. Meanwhile, the Armed Forces modernized and expanded, swallowing up a large percentage of the national budget while continuing their war against recalcitrant armed groups. One of the 'three main causes' expounded by the Tatmadaw over the period was the 'non-disintegration of the Union', but the reality is that Myanmar had never been integrated to begin with.

The democratic transition did little to change the situation, despite the signing by a dozen armed groups of a national ceasefire agreement (NCA), which still did not entail a political settlement, during the administration of the former general Thein Sein. Conflicts flared up again, including the war with the Kachin Independence Army (KIA), reignited in 2011 after seventeen years of ceasefire. Following the NLD victory in 2015, the government of Aung San Suu Kyi showed little willingness to make political concessions to the ethnic minorities or criticize the military's heavy-handed tactics.

Yet, despite their distrust towards the NLD, some ethnic armed organizations are already defying the military junta led by Min Aung Hlaing. In the east, the Karen National Union (KNU), the oldest armed group still active, is providing a safe haven for those fleeing the cities and has attacked the Armed Forces in recent weeks. The Tatmadaw has reacted by launching airstrikes on some positions and villages, killing several civilians and displacing thousands. In the north, the KIA is redoubling its attacks against the Tatmadaw. In neighboring Shan state, the Restoration Council of Shan State (RCSS) has ramped up its rhetoric against the junta, but has so far avoided a direct confrontation, while fighting another armed group, the Ta'ang National Liberation Army (TNLA). The country's most powerful ethnic armed group with up to 25,000 soldiers, the United Wa State Army (UWSA), has little incentive to enmesh itself in the conflict. At peace with the Tatmadaw since 1989, it gained control of its own territory along the Chinese border – an independent state in all but in name – after making huge profits from narcotics. Backed by China, the UWSA is unlikely to turn against the Armed Forces without its patron's authorization.

More ambiguous is the position of the Arakan Army (AA), a Rakhine ethno-nationalist organization created as recently as 2009 which in the last two years has engaged the Tatmadaw in a bloody war. The AA signed an informal ceasefire two months before the coup and then kept silent for weeks. The junta has wooed the politicians of the most powerful party in Rakhine state, the Arakan National Party (ANP) giving them positions in its administration, and Rakhine is the only state where the civil disobedience movement has not taken hold, despite several civil society organizations expressing their disgust at the ANP's collaborationism with the junta. The AA is likely exhausted after its two years of intense fighting against the Tatmadaw, and has issued statements condemning the coup, but so far it has not expressed a firm commitment to fight against it.

In order to attract the minorities to its side, the CRPH has formally rejected the military's Constitution and released a charter for an alternative one, to be drafted with the ethnic armed groups and political parties. Its aim is to establish a 'Federal Democracy Union' that would grant the ethnic minorities a degree of autonomy never seen in the country since independence. In that sense, it is an almost revolutionary document coming from members of a party, the NLD, that showed little tolerance toward the minorities' demands while it was in power.

But the charter has its limitations. It makes a distinction between 'fundamental rights' for citizens and 'collective rights' for the 'national races' (the original Burmese *taingyintha* is rendered in English as the more neutral-sounding 'ethnic nationalities'). This provision could potentially discriminate against the Rohingya and other groups not regarded as 'national', despite assurances

from CRPH representatives that the Rohingya will not be left out in the new Burma. It is very unlikely that Rakhine nationalists, who share their State with the Rohingya and are as resentful of the latter's presence as they are of Bamar domination, could ever accept the Rohingya as a 'national race'; so the recognition of 'collective rights' for the Rohingya remains almost an impossibility. Ultimately, the plight of the Rohingya stems from the pervasive 'national races' worldview, and its only solution would be to do away with ethnicity as a political category; but that would be unacceptable for the other ethnic minorities. The charter does not offer a solution to that conundrum, and it is perhaps unfair to demand that that it should, given the pressing circumstances in which it has been drafted. But there is a real danger that, as alliances are formed, the Rohingya will be excluded once again from Myanmar's body politic.

For now, as the majority of the population faces a long and protracted conflict with the Tatmadaw, the creation of any such Federal Democracy remains a distant possibility. With Aung San Suu Kyi under arrest, the coup and its subsequent repression have unleashed political forces largely dormant in the country's heartlands during the last decade, as well as a new sense of solidarity among the minorities. The only hope of defeating the junta led by Min Aung Hlaing lies in the borderlands. The ethnic minorities do not share a common history of anti-colonial struggle, but now they face a common fight against the Tatmadaw which could create an altered image of Myanmar nationhood. Throughout Myanmar's history as an independent country, the project of building a nation-state from the centre to the peripheries has failed. Perhaps the time has come for a leap into the unknown: the attempt to build a different Myanmar from the peripheries to the centre.

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P.S.

• New Left Review. 15 April 2021:
https://newleftreview.org/sidecar/posts/a-new-myanmar?pc=1332&fbclid=IwAR1rCX68tu_HvH_cgbR44yntqma8TnClvA4RVtT-uVL1-I_XKycYpIjjDQc