

Myanmar: The all-out war of the Burmese military against its own people

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The coup staged by the Burmese military on February 1, 2021 is plunging the country into an all-out war waged by the armed forces against virtually the whole of the population, as a massive civil disobedience movement is preventing the generals from taking full control of the state. In this lopsided war, the junta led by the Commander in Chief, Min Aung Hlaing, is using all the instruments of violence at its disposal with maniac relish. Soldiers are shooting unarmed civilians—[more than 500 killed so far](#), including children as young as five; they are mercilessly beating up protesters and torturing jailed dissidents to death in a rampage of blind brutality designed to terrorize the entire nation into total submission.

Such brutality can be seen as the desperation of a cornered beast unleashing its fury in all directions. The need for this violence to enable the Tatmadaw (as the Burmese military is known) to stay in power betrays a lack of popular legitimacy that the violence is doing nothing to remedy. Quite to the contrary. Whatever the outcome of the confrontation, the army is more hated now than ever, and such hatred will endure for years to come. This ends the brief and rare moment in which the army enjoyed popular support for its [genocidal “clearance operations”](#) in 2016 and 2017 against the Rohingya, a beleaguered Muslim minority indigenous to the western state of Arakan. Because many Burmese despise the Rohingya as a demographic threat and [wrongly regard them as “illegal immigrants”](#) from what is now Bangladesh, many Burmese had approved of the military's actions against them.

With the elected leader of Burma (officially known as Myanmar), [[1](#)] Aung San Suu Kyi, under house arrest and isolated from the world, and with most prominent politicians in her party, the National League for Democracy (NLD), arrested or on the run, large swathes of the population quickly decided to take matters into their own hands. Shortly after the coup, Burmese citizens from all walks of life launched a spontaneous and peaceful civil disobedience movement that has been surprisingly resilient in spite of, or perhaps due to, its lack of a centralized leadership. Doctors and nurses, civil servants, bank employees, garment factory workers, students, dock workers and many others [have brought the economy to a standstill](#) for several weeks, taking to the streets almost daily, and managing to make the country ungovernable for the State Administration Council (SAC) led by military commander Min Aung Hlaing.

Meanwhile, a group of lawmakers elected in the November 2020 elections has created a civilian government, the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), which is trying to gain international support while also negotiating a common front with the ethnic armed organizations that had been fighting the central state for decades, demanding autonomy for their regions in the

borderlands of the country. These lawmakers escaped the capital at the coup and are now in an undisclosed location. There are already talks to form [a unified “federal army”](#) to fight the Tatmadaw. Such a unified force would be extremely difficult to assemble, given the deep distrust among some of those armed groups, but many of them have [expressed their solidarity](#) with the civil disobedience movement, and some have [renewed their attacks](#) against the military.

In short, the takeover has united in unprecedented fashion a country deeply divided along ethnic, religious, and class lines. The Tatmadaw has always portrayed itself as the sole guarantor of national unity and the coup is paradoxically proving the point in an unintended way: with few exceptions, the whole country seems to be united against it.

AN ESCALATING CONFRONTATION

The takeover seems to go against the Tatmadaw’s own interests and the system that worked well for them since 2011, when the junta that ruled Burma since 1988 decided to embark on a transition to a “discipline-flourishing democracy,” whose terms were dictated by the generals with no input from the old pro-democracy camp. The Constitution drafted by the military gives the generals control over the three key security ministers—defence, home affairs and border affairs—as well as one quarter of all seats in Parliament, guaranteeing the military a central role in politics and freedom from civilian oversight.

The coup [followed weeks of allegations](#), still unsubstantiated, of widespread electoral fraud, after the resounding victory of the NLD in the November 2020 election. These allegations were first made from Tatmadaw’s losing proxy party, the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), and then from the military itself. The Union Election Commission (UEC), appointed by the NLD government, rejected these allegations and eventually Commander in Chief Min Aung Hlaing decided to seize power hours before the parliament was due to convene and vote for the newly-elected government.

Meanwhile, ongoing developments in the war between the Tatmadaw and the Arakan Army (AA), a guerrilla faction fighting for autonomy for the Rakhine, the mostly Buddhist ethnic group dominant in the state of Arakan, also contributed to deepening tensions between the NLD and the military. Since late 2018, the war in Arakan had turned into the most violent conflict in the country and, a few weeks before the 2020 elections, the UEC decided to cancel the polls in most of the state for alleged security reasons. But shortly after the elections in November, conversations between the Tatmadaw and the AA resulted in [an informal cease-fire](#), and the AA issued a statement calling for new elections in the whole of the state, an idea that the Tatmadaw supported. The NLD has little support in Arakan and was likely to lose to the local Arakan National Party (ANP), which is stronger than the NLD in the state. The civilian government ignored the demands of the AA and the Burmese military to hold elections in the Arakan, which undoubtedly further infuriated the Tatmadaw generals.

The military appointed some ANP [politicians as members of the new military regime in Arakan](#), where the civil disobedience movement has not taken hold. This makes Arakan the only region in the country with no significant protest against the new regime, with the exception of some towns in the south of the state, where Rakhine nationalism is weaker and thus opposition to the junta is stronger. Meanwhile, the military removed the AA designation as a terrorist organization in March 2021. The armed group remained largely silent after the coup, but [it has recently announced its intention](#) to join forces with other militias to fight the Tatmadaw. Nevertheless, the ANP continues its support for the military junta, making Arakan the only state where the divide-and-rule political tactics of the Tatmadaw seem to have succeeded to date.

Whatever the ultimate reasons for the coup (and given the opaqueness of the Tatmadaw leadership

we may never know for sure), it doesn't seem to have been very carefully planned. This is testified to by the defection of many diplomats, most dramatically the [Burmese representative at the UN](#); in addition, the huge popular backlash against the coup appears to have caught the junta by surprise. The fact that the military didn't manufacture a situation of instability strong enough to convince at least some sections of the population that a military takeover was necessary (as happened in Thailand prior to the coup in 2014, which came after months of street protests and political turmoil), demonstrates how ill-planned the action was.

Rather than the result of a conspiracy long in the making, the coup seems to be the Tatmadaw's 'solution' to what probably was at first a manageable confrontation between the NLD and the generals that escalated as the latter became increasingly intolerant of the civilian government's assertiveness while the NLD decided to defend to the last its electoral victory. Now, the claim made by Min Aung Hlaing and his henchmen that the takeover was constitutional and their promise to hold elections within one year both sound increasingly hollow. The coup means the effective dismantling of the 2008 Constitution.

AUNG SAN SUU KYI'S MISCALCULATIONS

The confrontation over the election results was the first time that Suu Kyi and her party openly stood up to the military since the beginning of the transition. The only precedent was perhaps the creation, after the NLD victory in the 2015 elections, of the position of "state counselor" for her, in order to circumvent the constitutional clause barring her from the presidency as the mother of two foreign nationals. But it's very likely that the generals allowed her to get away with an arguably unconstitutional position that put her "above the President," given that she had shown herself to be compliant and willing to collaborate with them.

Throughout most of the transition, Aung San Suu Kyi's main, and perhaps unwitting, role was to provide legitimacy to the generals' "discipline-flourishing democracy." Her explicit objective was to change the Constitution to put the military under civilian control, but that was an almost impossible task under the rules she implicitly had accepted, given that any amendment requires at first the votes of more than 75% of seats in Parliament. The presence of soldiers occupying 25% of the seats makes such an amendment all but impossible without the assent of the military.

Throughout the transition she has behaved more often as a partner of the military than as a political rival; she has partnered with them in the name of "national reconciliation," meaning a pact between the military and the old pro-democracy elite of which she is the figurehead. Such partnership may have been due at times to strategic calculations and to the fear of confrontation with the men holding the guns, but at many other times the NLD has shown itself to be more aligned ideologically with them than was apparent before. This was never more clear than when Suu Kyi decided to lead Burma's self-defense two years ago at the International Court of Justice against the accusation of genocide brought because of the brutal operations of the Tatmadaw against the Rohingya in 2016-17.

The Tatmadaw and the NLD [share indistinguishable racist ideas](#) on national identity [2], according to which only the members of the so-called "national races" are to be regarded as bona fide members of the Burmese nation. This most tragically excludes the Rohingya through a mendacious official historiography. The NLD government has also shown little sensitivity to the grievances of other ethnic minorities. Its handling of the peace process with the ethnic armed organizations [has been an abject failure](#) [3], perhaps unavoidably given that the military was never under civilian control, but compounded by the rejection of all political concessions to the minorities.

Meanwhile, Suu Kyi has proven to be almost as authoritarian and distrustful of people's involvement in politics, beyond voting for her, as the generals; this is shown in her dismissal of mass protests and her disregard for the lively Burmese civil society. Participatory politics are simply too unpredictable and risky for her strategy of rapprochement with the military. Also, Suu Kyi shares with the generals [a similar neoliberal project](#), which the previous junta had tried to launch in the 1990s, but that couldn't take off in the context of the international isolation imposed upon Burma at that time. The Suu Kyi government has not made any attempt to implement any kind of redistributive policy to address the country's huge economic inequalities. Instead [she has wooed the 'cronies'](#), a few unscrupulous businessmen who made enormous fortunes during the dictatorship through their contacts with the junta, admonishing them to "work for others in the future" without touching their own material interests.

THE 'FATHER' OF THE TATMADAW

The Suu Kyi/military rapprochement seems to have been based on the assumption that the Tatmadaw was somehow "redeemable." Suu Kyi has often expressed her "fondness" for what she likes to describe as the military of her father, Aung San, the hero of Burmese independence, who created the military to fight British colonial power and who was killed by political rivals in 1947. But that is a gross misconception. Aung San indeed founded the military, but today there remain few traces of the anti-colonial force he assembled or of his vision of a Tatmadaw subordinated to a civilian government. The Tatmadaw, in its present form, has other parents, whatever use it may make at times of the figure of Aung San for propaganda purposes.

The main architect of the Burmese Tatmadaw was General Ne Win, Army Chief since 1949, and the man who led the country's first two coups d'état. His second coup, staged in 1962, put an end to Burma's experiment with democracy and inaugurated twenty-six years of dictatorship under the rubric of the "Burmese way to Socialism." Even before taking power, [Ne Win began to build the Tatmadaw as an autonomous force](#), a state within the state that took shape in a context of external threats—the infiltration in the early 1950s of Kuomintang troops from China, after their defeat by Mao Zedong's troops in the Chinese civil war—and, more crucially, permanent civil war—against the insurgent Communist Party of Burma, which wouldn't disappear until 1989, and several ethnic guerrillas such as the Karen National Union, the Kachin Independence Army, to name just two that remain active to this day. Most of those ethnic minorities had never been under the direct authority of the central Burmese state for long before the British unified Burma; they had little reason to feel they were part of a common national project basically imposed by the Bamar majority after British colonialism was defeated.

These protracted wars against internal political enemies and minorities turned the Tatmadaw into an occupation force in the rugged borderlands of the country, where it made use of brutal counter-insurgency tactics that made little distinction between enemy combatants and civilians. Similar tactics occasionally would be deployed in the urban centers whenever Bamars rebelled against military rule, as in 1988, when a popular uprising put an end to Ne Win's rule only to be replaced by the military junta that drafted the current constitution.

Ne Win not only sought to subdue the ethnic minorities to a Bamar-centric nation-building project, he also tried to get rid of putative foreigners, such as either the descendants of Indians who migrated to Burma during the colonial period, or the Rohingya. He also had a deep distrust of democracy that stemmed from an utter contempt towards the Bamar majority itself, to which he belonged but which he regarded as too immature to rule itself. Thus, he instilled a sense of mission in the Tatmadaw as the only institution capable of ruling the country and keeping it together.

Ultimately, despite his claims of working “to give back Burma to the Burmese,” what Ne Win accomplished was to give it solely to the Military. Already before his first coup, he began to make the Tatmadaw financially self-sufficient, establishing autonomous companies that are the precedents for the gigantic conglomerates that now dominate the country’s economy. Ne Win and his heirs turned the military into a warrior caste, in many respects isolated from the rest of the population. Officers enjoy privileges beyond the reach of most Burmese and [live in a world largely cut-off from Burmese society](#) at large; they and their families have their residencies in isolated compounds, attend their own schools, are treated in their own hospitals, and socialize almost exclusively with each other.

After Ne Win’s downfall in 1988, the military’s *esprit de corps* survived basically unadulterated, replacing the socialist leanings of Ne Win’s regime with a neatly capitalist outlook. [Corruption and economic plundering](#) reached never before seen heights after the end of his rule.

The Tatmadaw claims as one of its missions the “protection of the people,” and there is some twisted truth in that: it could aptly be described as a protection racket, and as is often the case with such organizations, Burmese people have to pay primarily to avoid the violence of the protection racket itself.

The caste mentality and social isolation go a long way towards explaining the brutality of the Tatmadaw against its own people. It also serves to explain why defections so far are limited to [a few low- and mid-ranking Police and Army officers](#) and why no one in the higher echelons of the military is breaking ranks with Ming Aung Hlaing. This was always a distant possibility that is becoming ever more distant by the day, as more officers share a common responsibility in mounting crimes against the population.

PROSPECTS FOR A NEW BURMA

The coup and the repression have fully revealed the utter futility of both Aung San Suu Kyi’s attempts at “national reconciliation” and [the policies of engagement with the generals](#) carried out by many Western countries after the beginning of the transition [4]. But the Rohingya and many members of other minorities like the Kachin already knew from recent memory what she was refusing to see: the Burmese military is an unredeemable criminal organization.

Burmese are suffering now a repression in cities of central Burma that surpasses that of the “saffron revolution” in 2007 or even the bloodbath with which the Tatmadaw reasserted its power in 1988. In this context, many Burmese are doing some serious soul-searching and expressing their solidarity with minorities who have continuously suffered such abuses for decades. A new interethnic alliance is emerging. This solidarity is even reaching the Rohingya, with some Burmese expressing regrets for not condemning the recent crimes against the Rohingya and representatives of the CRPH reaching out to Rohingya leaders.

These expressions of support for the most widely despised minority in Burma might have been unthinkable only a few months ago, and they are encouraging. But it is difficult to assess how widespread they are or to what extent the CRPH is sincere or merely using an international *cause célèbre* to garner support abroad. Also, most contrite voices put all the blame for the plight of the Rohingya on the Tatmadaw, but racism against Rohingya infects even peoples who have staunchly opposed military rule for decades, such as the NLD leaders. The racism [goes much deeper](#) than mere “brainwashing” by a hated military whose propaganda virtually nobody in Burma ever believed—except when it came to the Rohingya. And the reality in Arakan is that Rakhine politicians known for their hatred towards Rohingya are now members of the state government.

Building a multi-ethnic democratic Burma, where all communities can reach an agreement to coexist peacefully and freely without being oppressed by a Bamar-dominated government after decades of conflict, will take much more than getting rid of the murderous Tatmadaw. This is a necessary condition, yet not a sufficient one. It will take a measure of political imagination, generosity, and boldness that the old pro-democracy forces led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the NLD have utterly lacked. For now, the uphill battle is to defeat Min Aung Hlaing and his military junta; the alliances being forged in order to accomplish that will be the basis for the future rebuilding of the country once such struggle is over.

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P.S.

- Positions politics – praxis. March 30, 2021:
<https://positionspolitics.org/carlos-sardina-galache-the-all-out-war-of-the-burmese-military-against-its-own-people/>

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Footnotes

[1] There has been some controversy about these terms since the previous military junta changed the official name of the country in 1989. The change only affected languages other than Burmese and was based on two misconceptions: that ‘Myanmar’ is somehow more inclusive to ethnic minorities and that ‘Burma’ is a colonial name. But both names refer historically to the Bamar-dominated kingdoms of the central lands in the country and when the British used ‘Burma’ they just translated from the original Burmese name, they didn’t impose a new name on the country as, for instance, the Spaniards did in the Philippines. I use the old nomenclature throughout this text, as a matter of personal preference and also because I think it sounds better in English.

[2] Available on ESSF (article 57439), [Myanmar: State Racism Meets Neoliberalism](#).

[3] Available on ESSF (article 57725), [Selling dog meat while showing a goat head in Myanmar - Aung San Suu Kyi’s and the peace process](#).

[4] Available on ESSF (article 57726), [Western engagement: Misreading the Myanmar military’s mind](#).