

Burma: The War vs. the People

Monday 5 July 2021, by [GALACHE Carlos Sardiña](#), [WEISSMAN Suzi](#) (Date first published: 24 April 2021).

Suzi Weissman conducted this interview with Carlos Sardiña Galache, the author of *The Burmese Labyrinth: A History of the Rohingya Tragedy* (Verso). He has recent articles in Jacobin and the Sidecar blog at [NewLeftReview.org](#). He has a [website](#). This interview, recorded on April 24, is on Suzi Weissman's [Jacobin Radio podcast](#), and has been edited for *Against the Current*.

Suzi Weissman: Since the military coup that overthrew the civilian government of Aung San Suu Kyi on February First, a massive civil disobedience movement has emerged. The economy has been paralyzed through strikes in key sectors. The military has been in power most of the time since the country's independence from British colonial rule. What are the sources of this repressive form of rule?

Carlos Sardiña Galache: Burma never finished its nation building. Ever since independence in 1948, most of the ethnic minorities who live in the periphery of the country don't feel a sense of belonging to the country and have been trying to separate — or at least have autonomy — within the federal system. The Bamar, comprising the majority, tried to impose a centralized model of the state.

By 1962 the Tatmadaw, as the Burmese military is called, took power because they saw themselves as the only ones who could manage to keep Burma united. That inaugurated 50 years of military dictatorship, first under the guise of the so-called “Burmese way of socialism” government, which was not socialist, but that's another question. After a massive uprising in 1982, they adopted a capitalistic model on neoliberal lines.

In 2011, they initiated what they call a “disciplined, flourishing democracy,” which meant a multiparty electoral democracy with parliament. The Tatmadaw kept control of over 25% of the parliament and three key ministries. This process culminated in 2015 with the victory of Aung San Suu Kyi's party, the National League for Democracy.

Although Aung San Suu Kyi spent 15 years under house arrest, we might call this process a convergence of elites: the pro-democracy elite led by Aung San Suu Kyi, and the military elite.

For reasons that are not altogether clear, the military decided to put an end to that experiment with democracy on February 1 this year. The reasons they give is that there was voter fraud during the election last November, but nobody believes that. Something happened that made the military say, OK, we take the power back.

Now, they claim that the coup — which they don't call a coup, of course — is constitutional. But even according to their own constitution, it's not constitutional. However, the coup triggered a huge popular response against the military. And right now, you can describe the situation as a war between the military and virtually the whole of the Burmese population, ethnic minorities included.

Minorities in a “Failed Nation”

SW: The Financial Times headline asked, "Is Myanmar on the road to becoming a failed state?" You argue that it's never been a functioning state. What do you mean and why did that lead to the coup?

CSG: It's not so much a failed state as a failed nation. When I say that it's a failed state already, it's not in the sense of complete chaos. What I mean is that the military, the government, ever since independence hasn't managed to control the whole of the territory because several guerrillas from ethnic minorities have established their own power along the borders with China and Thailand.

Apart from the Bamar who live in the heartlands, nobody feels they are Burmese. If you go to the border areas and ask people, what are you? if they are Kachin, they will say, I am Kachin, not Burmese — whereas if you go to the Philippines, they won't tell you I'm Locano, they will tell you I'm Filipino, and secondly I'm Locano.

In Myanmar, that's not the case because the project of nation building was a Bamar project from the beginning.

That means the pro-democracy camp led by Aung San Suu Kyi and the military are more or less on the same page. There are no essential differences: both want a centralized state in which the ethnic minorities are going to have little autonomy.

The reasons for the coup must be found somewhere else. In my opinion, they are not ideological. The difference is who should have the power, not what to do with it.

SW: Is there a difference between calling the country Myanmar and calling it Burma?

CSG: I much prefer Burma. The name was changed to Myanmar in 1989 by the former military junta. In Burmese it was called Myanmar, so basically it is like Germany telling people, you must call me Deutschland in English.

The junta argued that Myanmar was more inclusive of ethnic minorities, but both Burma and Myanmar refer historically to the Bamar kingdoms in the central areas of the country, not the minority area.

They said that Burma is a colonial name. But when the British arrived, they didn't change the name. It's not like the Philippines, which is a colonial name, the name of the Spanish King at the time. That's what I would say is a colonial name.

SW: How did the National League for Democracy develop during the years of military rule?

CSG: Aung San Suu Kyi is the daughter of Aung San, the father of modern Burma. He's the one who fought against the British and then fought against the Japanese in World War Two. He negotiated the terms of independence with the British in 1948 but he was assassinated a few months before independence when Aung San Suu Kyi was two years and a half years old.

Aung San was from the majority and tried to get the ethnic minorities on board, but it was a very sketchy process. He signed an agreement with only four groups but it was not spelled out before he was killed.

In 1988, during the uprising against Ne Win [ed: Army Chief since 1949 who led two coups], Aung San Suu Kyi, who had been living in the United Kingdom and was married to Michael Aris, the famous scholar, was taking care of her mother in Rangoon. She was convinced to join the National League for Democracy and lead the pro-democracy movement.

The chairman of the National League for Democracy, U Tin Oo, who is now 95, was a commander in chief of the military during the Ne Win dictatorship. The leaders are Bamar and view ethnic minorities with certain distrust. All share this idea of a national project, which is dictated on Bamar terms and excludes groups deemed as foreigners, including the Rohingya.

SW: Could you explain the citizenship rule? I think that people in the West who were championing Aung San Suu Kyi and her road to democracy were shocked to see that she didn't lift a finger to help the Rohingya when they were being subjected to genocidal killing and forced to flee.

CSG: According to the citizenship law passed by Ne Win in 1992, only the so-called national races are to have citizenship. This means that whoever had citizenship, according to their previous citizenship law, should keep the citizenship.

Many Rohingya were citizens. Then the regime went to all the Rohingya people and took away their documents, supposedly to give them new ones, then suddenly then said "No, you are not a citizen because you are not members of a national race." These are defined as those ethnic or racial groups who were in Burma before 1824, the date of the first Anglo-Burmese war and the beginning of colonialism.

The debate is over whether the Rohingya were already there or not. Of course they were already there, but others arrived from what is now Bengal during colonial times. They mixed with the ones who were already in Burma. Now it would be completely impossible to separate the descendants. The military said most, if not all, arrived during colonial times and therefore are not a national race.

SW: Does this citizenship law mirror the Indian one? [This law introduced by the Hindu-nationalist Narendra Modi government will strip over two million Muslims of Indian citizenship — ed.]

CSG: This nativist, racist conception of citizenship in Burma might be a model for India, which seems to be going in the same direction.

SW: You have emphasized the ideological similarity between the generals and the Aung San Suu Kyi forces. Is there a class aspect that is being disguised? Help us understand the strikes in the context of political economy that is operating.

CSG: During the first military dictatorship and during the Ne Win era there was a kind of pseudo-socialist system or a state capitalism. From 1988 to 2011, the State Law and Order Restoration Council and its puppet, Burma Socialist Program Party, instituted a purely capitalist system.

The Tatmadaw wanted to open the markets and create a neoliberal model but it never took off because of the sanctions imposed by Western countries. Instead, what happened was a kind of crony capitalism in which the military controls a big part of the economy through two conglomerates. There is a group of rich cronies who made their fortunes through their contacts with the military and who have a big slice of the pie.

After 2011 and the transition to democracy this neoliberal model took off. At the same time a vibrant group of trade unions took advantage of the new political liberalization. Aung San Suu Kyi was not sympathetic to them because she wanted to assuage the military. Mass movements are unpredictable and not easy to control.

She was interested in deepening intra-elite rapprochement between the pro-democracy forces and the military. She admonished the cronies and encouraged them to be moral: "You have gotten your riches through your dealings with a dictatorship. But I believe that everybody has a second chance, and now you should use your riches to be good."

But she did not demand increasing taxes or control over their fortunes or redistributive policies whatsoever.

That's what leads me to say that the difference between Aung San Suu Kyi and the military is not ideological. Both are neoliberal conservatives. Perhaps the closest Western model to Aung San Suu Kyi is Margaret Thatcher.

She is moralistic but committed to the free market. Yet the military didn't want to share power with her. The ultimate question was: Is the military over the civilian government or is the civilian government over the military? That was the conflict. At some point the military decided: We are the power.

Massive Resistance

SW: Were you surprised at the level of resistance? Do you think the military miscalculated when they took power, thinking they could just easily shove Aung San Suu Kyi out of the way and go back to what they used to have?

CSG: There is a lot of debate about this but I think they really miscalculated and did not prepare the coup or create a crisis to make a military takeover acceptable to some significant sectors of the population.

But people really hate the military government. I have lived through the 2014 coup in Thailand when the military took over. Thai society was quite polarized. Large sectors of the population — conservatives, Royalist sectors — supported the coup.

Nothing of the sort is happening in Burma. Nobody supports the coup outside the military, because the military doesn't have ideological legitimacy in the eyes of the Burmese population.

Over the years I have talked with many Burmese people. Nobody really likes the military. Unfortunately, the only time they liked them was when the Rohingya people were attacked in 2017.

During the liberalization process, there was a modicum of political liberty that many people didn't know before. There was internet access that people didn't have until 2012.

Importantly, there was the growth of trade unions. These unions are at the forefront of most of the protests. They have used their skills and networks to organize against the coup and the military.

It is no wonder that the repression in big cities like Yangon or Rangoon is especially bloody in the working-class areas. These are the people who are on the barricades; they are people who have nothing to lose.

Most of the middle class were happy having Aung San Suu Kyi in power and trusting her to deal with the military. Whatever Aung San Suu Kyi did wrong, they could blame on the military since she didn't have much room to maneuver. But once they took Aung San Suu Kyi from them, they fought back. They, and especially the younger generation, have had in the last ten years certain liberties and don't want to renounce them and go back to military dictatorship.

Then you have minorities who are the people who have suffered for decades, on a daily basis, the violence of the military.

One of the most encouraging things I am seeing is that in social media and talking with friends, a lot of people in the heartlands of the country, who until two or three months ago didn't want to think

about the wars going on in the ethnic areas between the armed groups and the military, are now showing a newfound solidarity with ethnic minorities, including the Rohingya people.

So right now, it seems that the ethnic minorities and the Bamar are united — I would say even for the first time in history — against a common enemy, which happens to be the military.

SW: What do you see ahead?

CSG: I'm very reluctant to make predictions because I was one of many people who would have said no, there's not going to be a coup — and then there was. Virtually nobody saw it coming until two or three days before.

I think we are going to witness a very long, protracted and bloody conflict. The military is not going back. It is ruthless and relentless and the more they commit crimes, the more inflexible they are going to be.

The population, from what I am seeing, sees this as a struggle for life or death. So right now I think the only hope is for all the armed groups, and there are conversations, to unite in a common front and create a Federal Army that attacks the military at the same time.

If the military attacks the civil disobedience movement in the streets of Burma's heartlands and all or most of the armed groups in the peripheries are attacking them at the same time, the Tatmadaw is going to have trouble managing to defeat all these enemies. But I think this is going to be very long and very violent.

Suzi Weissman
Carlos Sardiña Galache

[Click here](#) to subscribe to ESSF newsletters in English and/or French.

P.S.

Against the Current

<https://againstthecurrent.org/atc213/burma-the-war-vs-the-people/>