

INTERVIEW MYANMAR POLITICS Interview: Operation 1027 and the growing armed alliance against Myanmar's junta

Thursday 7 December 2023, by [MYAT Aung Kaung](#) (Date first published: 6 December 2023).

Researcher Aung Kaung Myat unpacks the internal dynamics of the complex coalition of armed groups battling for dominance across Myanmar

Raisa: On 27 October, an alliance of armed groups battling Myanmar's military junta launched a coordinated attack in the Northern Shan state, making rapid advances. One month later, these armed groups attacked and seized junta bases across Northern Shan, Kachin and Rakhine states, and the upper reaches of Sagaing and Mandalay regions. As the conflict intensifies, more civilians are being displaced. As of 16 November, some 90,000 people had been displaced, including 6000 people who were newly displaced in Rakhine state alone. Humanitarian aid has also been delayed due to intensified fighting, with key transport routes between Sittwe and Yangon being restricted. What led to Operation 1027 and how are the advances made by the armed groups being received in neighbouring countries? Here to talk to us about this is Aung Kaung Myat. Welcome to the podcast!

Aung Kaung Myat: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here and I'm looking forward to share some of what I know about Burma and Burmese politics.

Raisa: Just to start off, what is Operation 1027, and who are these armed groups that make up what's being referred to as the Three Brotherhood Alliance?

Aung Kaung Myat: So Operation 1027, it was launched on 27 October, and that's where they got the name from. And it was launched in Northern Shan state, near the Chinese border. So the primary objective of the operation is to capture the city of Laukkai, which used to be a home of the MNDAA, one of the ethnic armed groups fighting against the military government. The Three Brotherhood Alliance has been formed for many years and there are three armed groups that are in this alliance.

The major armed group that has been fighting is the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army, also known as MNDAA. They are from the Kokang ethnic group and other armed groups that are fighting along with them include the Ta'Ang National Liberation Army. This is also another ethnic armed group in Shan state. And we also have the Arakan Army, which is based in the western part of Myanmar, but they sent a few of their fighters to Shan state and they fought together with the two other armed groups. The MNDAA has a long history of struggle in Burma. They were a splinter group which left the Communist Party of Burma. The Communist Party of Burma has been fighting with the military government ever since independence. In 1989, the Communist Party of Burma broke up into two guerrilla ethnic armies and MNDAA is one of them. In the 1990s and 2000s, they had a ceasefire with the government. But in 2009, they began fighting with the military government again. The same can be said about the TNLA. They were formed in the 1960s with a different name, different leadership. But then they had a ceasefire in the 1990s. But it didn't last long and in 2009

they began fighting. And ever since then, I would say they are gaining their territories slowly and they've been gaining a lot of manpower as well. The Arakan Army arguably is the most successful rebel group in terms of manpower and firepower, they represent the ethnic Rakhine group in the western part of Myanmar, near the Bangladesh border. But they sent their fighters to fight along with other rebel groups. And also they like to spread their troops around for strategic reasons because Rakhine state is small and they don't produce their own food so they spread their troops around.

These are not the only groups that are fighting - these are the groups comprising ethnic minorities. These groups are fighting along with other more recently established armies, which are anti-junta. The difference is that the earlier armed groups come from ethnic minority groups but the newly formed armed groups come from majority communities, mostly made up of young people who were angered by the military coup. Some of the armed groups fighting along with the Brotherhood Alliance include the Burma People's Liberation Army, the People's Liberation Army and the Mandalay People's Defence Force. These groups are fighting along with more established armies. And also there have been continued fighting in Chin state in the west, Karenni or Kayah state in the east and also southeast of Burma with different armed groups. So there have been lots of fighting in recent months, mostly concentrated in Shan state, but there has been fighting in other areas as well.

Raisa: And there's been, you know, a lot of reporting about the gains that these armed groups are making against the military junta. Can you tell us what the latest is on that front?

Aung Kaung Myat: What's new is that this is probably the first time in the post-independence history of Burma where the military lost a lot of territories in such a small amount of time. So the operation was announced a month ago, and they've been gaining a lot of strategic areas in northern Shan states, including the border areas of China, and they are now aiming at Laukkai city.

So we need to also know about the context of the military coup and popular resistance to the military coup that started in February. Most people probably came across newspaper headlines about Burma in February 2021 when the military staged a coup against the popularly elected government, led by the National League for Democracy. There have been hundreds of thousands of people out on the streets. They protested against the military rule and military dominance in society in general, and faced a very brutal crackdown by the military, with soldiers opening fire against the protesters. There's been reckless bloody violence on the streets. Many young people decided to go to the ethnic armed groups and take up military training. So the resistance has been going on for quite some time, but of course because they are very new to the resistance they have not been very successful. They can conduct guerilla warfare as has been the case in the middle and the southeast of the country. But it's not an exaggeration to say that the military government, which calls itself the State Administration Council, has been stretched thin since the coup, and there has been virtually no public support for the military. Their morale is quite low. In fact, there has been very public anger towards the military for their brutal crackdown on protesters.

Operation 1027 occurred in the context of this political situation and the alliance captured more than 100 positions of the military government in northern Shan state and other areas, and gained control of several important towns, including a key border crossing with China. So the alliance also controls several highways and they also managed to destroy the bridges to make sure the military cannot send in reinforcements. There have been synchronised offensives in other areas - the resistance likes to describe their offensives against the military as 'waves' in public statements. There has been fighting in Kachin state in the north, Sagaing in the middle and Rakhine and Chin state in the west. The most impressive battles have been in the Kayah state or the Karenni. One

ethnic group called Karenni Nationalities Defence Force (KNDF) are trying to capture Loikaw, which is the capital of Kayah state. They secured control of most of the areas in this state and if they secure the state capital the entire state will be under the control of resistance forces. So these are the gains that they have made in recent months.

Raisa: Something that maybe hasn't been reported as much internationally is that the Brotherhood Alliance has announced that one of its aims is to eradicate what it calls cyber-scams syndicates in the Kokang region. Can you tell us a little bit about these scams and why they are focusing on this issue in particular?

Aung Kaung Myat: To understand that, we probably need to talk about the particular relationship between the ruling military and the militias, or what they call, border guard forces, BGF for short. So the military has been fighting the ethnic armed groups for quite a while, and one of the strategies that they use is they know that there are soldiers who are basically recruited from other parts of the country, mostly from ethnic majority Bamar Buddhists. So their soldiers are not very familiar with the territories of the armed groups composed of ethnic minorities. So they decided to make a deal with the militia groups in the region. These militia groups agreed to be under the command of the military. They're not under complete control of the military, but still they follow their orders to some extent. So in return, the leadership of the BGF could operate businesses in many parts of the economy.

Initially, they were in mining and trade, also they engaged in illicit economy, and they slowly moved towards the casino business. They built casino hotels near the Thai border, in the Kayin state, and also in the Shan state, near the Chinese border. And these casinos are, as you can imagine, unregulated. So during COVID, they lost a lot of their businesses, so as a result, they put a lot of their gambling businesses online. And from that, they wanted to [set up] scam businesses.

What they do is they use a lot of these online apps, social media to scam people. They've been trying to traffic people into their casinos, and then they just lock them down - basically just use these victims, and force them to scam other people. If you've been following the news, from Hong Kong, Singapore, China and Malaysia, they lure them with romance and good job offers, and once they are in the hotels, they are forced to work and scam people online. So that has been their main business model. Needless to say, it caught the attention of the Chinese authorities, and they have been trying to crack down on these businesses recently.

The military government won't hand in their own people - the BGF leadership - to the Chinese. So what I think happened, I don't have solid evidence, is that the MNDAA, the rebel groups, probably made a deal with the Chinese government. They want Laukkai city back because this is their home as recently as 2009. In return, the Chinese government probably gave their tacit support to the rebels, because the militias who control the city currently, they're just causing a lot of instability for China. They torture Chinese citizens, they even kill Chinese citizens. So they want the leaders of these scam businesses.

There were some interesting media reports about who ran all these scam centres. There are basically four influential families who operate these businesses. And surprisingly, they not only run these operations, some of their relatives, like their sons, they might have their son as the head of the BGF, or the Burmese police force, and some of their family members are actually the MPs of the military-affiliated USDP [Union Solidarity and Development Party]. So as you can see, the business people behind the scam operations are very intertwined with military leadership. The Chinese government has wanted them for a very long time, but the SAC are unwilling to turn in, all the BGF leaders who work for them. One of these businessmen received an honorable title from the SAC chairman, Min Aung Hlaing, recently. The military needs the BGF to keep the ethnic armed groups

in check, but the issue is the BGF business empire is rampant, and all that illicit trade is too lucrative for them to give up. This is why the rebel group aims to eradicate cyber criminal scam syndicates in the region.

Raisa: Speaking of China, what do you make of comments made by the junta chief that China is providing tacit support for operation 1027?

Aung Kaung Myat: I believe that there must have been some level of understanding between the Chinese government and the rebels, because otherwise, there is no way they can fight near the Chinese border. There's been a lot of instances where the rebels fight with the military near the Chinese border, and the Chinese government doesn't like it, so they pressure both the rebel groups and the military government to come to a ceasefire agreement. It doesn't really end up in a peace agreement, but it results in temporary ceasefires between all these groups. So the fact that they continue fighting near the Chinese border means that China probably believes that at least the city of Laukkai should be ruled by the rebel group instead of the SAC-aligned militia, the BGF. Because China wants to put a stop to all these scam centers once and for all, and so that means they probably made an agreement with the MNDAA.

The relationship between China and Burma has seen ups and downs. So the democratic reforms that happened in 2011 started, many analysts believe, because of the military distrust towards China. There has been some sort of relationship between China and ethnic armed groups, and they don't really approve of that. So instead, they want to open up to the world, and that's why they wanted to go ahead with the reform. And during the NLD government, and the government led by Aung San Suu Kyi, they had a good relationship with China to some extent. And then when Rohingya crisis happened, it pushed them towards China even more, because China is the only country that was a bit more understanding towards the leadership when it came to the Rohingya genocide.

Then the 2021 coup happened, and China had total distrust towards the pro-democracy groups. And there is a reason for this as well, because in one of the massive demonstrations against the military rule in 2021, some of the Chinese old factories were burned down. Also, people protested against the Chinese embassy in Yangon, because China does support the military leadership to some extent.

There have been conspiracy theories that the coup is engineered by China to a large extent, but I don't think they are true. China didn't know about the coup in advance, but China, of course, compared to the Western countries, was a bit more welcoming towards the military government. They normalised the relationship a few months after the coup, and then just this year, the Chinese foreign minister visited Naypyidaw and met with Min Aung Hlaing.

But now, I think the relationship between the SAC and China is a little bit worse than previously. One of the telling signs that I can see is in the past weeks, there were some protests staged by pro-military Buddhist nationalists against China. This is very unusual in a country where freedom of speech has just shut down since the coup. So what that means is that these nationalist protests against China probably were approved by someone in the higher-ups before they can do that. So there were protests in 8 major cities against China, including in Yangon, in front of the Chinese embassy. So the military generals were probably convinced that China is involved in the rebellion, in the attacks against the military, and the spokesperson of the military even called it an invasion. He also said the attacks are financially supported by foreign countries. He didn't explicitly mention which countries, but it's fairly obvious that he meant China.

Raisa: Coming back to the different configurations between the armed groups, how is the coalition between ethnic armed groups and anti-junta armed groups holding?

Aung Kaung Myat: It's a very complex and difficult alliance, but the aspiration that is held by all these groups is that there should be a coalition of all armed groups fighting against the military. There are both informal and formal alliances. Three Brotherhood Alliance is a formal alliance, but they have informal alliances with armed groups coming from ethnic majority backgrounds.

There has been a lot of armed groups from ethnic minorities fighting against the military as far back as independence and post independence period. But because of the retraction [after the coup] people from ethnic majority backgrounds also wanted to join ethnic armed groups and receive military training. There are other neutral armed groups, for instance the biggest armed group the United Wa State Army, they are the biggest armed group in terms of manpower and firepower but they like to stay neutral in this conflict. All these other groups have the inspiration that military dominance in society will come to a stop one day, so because of that armed groups like the Karen National Union and Kachin Independence Army have been giving training to fighters who have ethnic majority backgrounds since the coup. And because of that they've been targeted by the military in 2021, there's been a lot of fighting in their territories, and also the Arakan army which has been fighting with the military before the coup - they continue fighting to gain territory in Rakhine state. There would be temporary ceasefires, but then there would be no formal agreement between the military government and these ethnic groups, so they would keep on fighting.

After the coup, the Bamar groups began to fight in the drylands of the country. These areas have never seen conflict before - at least not since the independence of the country. We're now seeing a lot of fighting in these areas with rebel groups with Bamar Buddhist backgrounds. So in effect they are the biggest threat to the military. We know that the ethnic armed groups can fight in their own territories but they don't have the ambition to just topple the military government once and for all, but the People's Defence Force [PDF] or Local Defence Force [LDF] armed groups come from Bamar Buddhist backgrounds, so they have the support of people from the majority community and they have the goal of toppling military rule. The alliance between the armed groups from minority and majority communities is quite an interesting development in the past few years so they have been fighting together for Operation 1027. The armed groups from the majority communities don't have a lot of experience fighting or a lot of manpower, but that is why they have been fighting alongside more experienced groups.

Raisa: There have also been reports that the military has been using airstrikes in retaliation to these armed groups. What do you know about the number of civilians that have been killed and displaced by shelling? And I'm also curious what the impact has been on the Rohingya community.

Aung Kaung Myat: It is not an exaggeration to say that the Burmese military acts like an occupying army against its own population. There is a very obvious pattern that emerged out of the way the military conducts its military operations. It's that whenever they suffered casualties in their infantry units, they would just resort to artillery and airstrikes in the areas controlled by the rebels. And also they make no distinction between civilians and fighters. They bombed a musical concert in territories controlled by AIA and they bombed a school in Sagaing. Also there have been airstrikes, artillery strikes on refugee camps and residential areas for quite some time. In terms of the numbers, it's difficult to make a guess. The media has reported thousands of them in different areas of the country.

In the drylands, which is in the middle of the country, the LDF has been fighting the military. And as a result, many people have to flee for the first time in their life. There are some refugee camps set up and some people had to just go and live in the jungle because they are afraid of the airstrikes. And similarly, there have been a lot of displacements going on in Kachin state, now in Shan state, Rakhine state as well. People might cross borders and that might cause tensions with neighbouring

countries. And to make things worse, the military has this what they call 'four-cuts' strategy in their military doctrine. So what that means is they want to cut off the rebels access to food, finance, intelligence and recruitment. But in reality, what that means is that they just targeted civilian populations. They would just burn villages and burn crops of the villagers in the hope that then they would just cut off the food of the rebels. And that triggers mass displacement, wherever that happens. As a result, they have been in a lot of refugee crises in Thailand, in China and also in India.

As for the Rohingya, there have been major controversies because the Arakan Army knows that whenever they start fighting, the military will just attack civilians. And this will make it difficult for civilians in the Rakhine state to survive, because Rakhine state has no access to food [Editor's Note: because of aid blockages in Rakhine state]. The Arakan Army answers to the Rakhine people and their recruits are primarily from the Rakhine ethnic group. They would like to fight in the areas where Rakhine people live, but instead they fight in the areas where there are Rohingya villagers. So when that happens, it's bad news for Rohingya villagers. They have already faced the genocide previously, so they needed to run and flee to other areas. International or humanitarian organisations, their efforts to address the humanitarian crisis is largely ineffective, primarily because they don't want to challenge the state power that is the military. So their humanitarian efforts are quite limited, but most of the refugees are internally displaced people. They mostly rely on the local humanitarian groups and CSOs [Civil Society Organisations] that have friendly relationships with the rebels.

Raisa: You were speaking about how in recent weeks, people have been fleeing across borders and into countries like India and China. What has been the reaction from these countries to these advances being made by armed groups, particularly given there's several ongoing infrastructure projects along the border?

Aung Kaung Myat: So there are primarily three neighboring countries that war refugees flee to - China, Thailand and India. So Thailand has been historically a hub for pro-democracy activists, but recently it has changed. The military junta in Thailand has a very good relationship with the Burmese government, and that results in some of the hostile policies of the Thai government towards the pro-democracy activists, rebel groups, and also war refugees in general.

As for China, China doesn't like instability in its border. It's been very open about it. And also because China has all these important infrastructure projects from the Belt and Road Initiative, they are one of the foreign governments which acknowledged the military government or the SAC in the first few months after the coup. And that was of course because of the China support towards the military government that initially earned a lot of anger from the pro-democracy groups in Burma. But because of the recent fighting, there are a lot of refugees coming towards the Chinese border. Chinese forces attacked them with tear gas to stop them from crossing the border. If it continues, we can expect China to pressure the armed groups for a ceasefire, but we know they also want to stop these scam operations on the border.

For India, their local Mizoram government is very friendly to refugees because of the shared culture and ethnicity. Well, of course, the national government of India is very hostile towards the rebels. I think their official policy so far is that they just want to work with the SAC. And what that means is that they're very hostile towards the rebels and anyone affiliated with the rebels.

Raisa: There's also been some discussion about how Operation 1027 opens the door to a new political template for Myanmar. What do you think that might look like given the different aims of all these armed groups who are involved in the operation?

Aung Kaung Myat: Ever since the coup and the resistance to the coup occurred in 2021, there's been a lot of analysis on regime collapse. So there's been a civil disobedience movement going on ever since the coup. So the government employees desire to strike against the military government, they no longer work for them. And the security forces are also joining. So according to a watchdog organization, there have been over 8,000 members of security forces who desire to defect from the military. These security forces come from the police and armed forces. In Burma, the police are under the command of the military and they are essentially treated as soldiers. The problem is police members and soldiers, when they defect, they defect out of conscience. They no longer want to associate themselves with an army that desires to kill its own people, peaceful protesters.

During Operation 1027, what we're seeing for the first time, perhaps for the first time in the post-independence history of the country, is that soldiers are surrendering in a large group. That is very unusual. So one of the questions is if the defection continues and because there has been such low morale in the military, we could perhaps see regime collapse, and the collapse of the military and military dominance in society, and pro-democracy groups take over.

Of course, the realistic interpretation of recent events is probably more to do with the recent collapse of the regime troops that are very rapid, probably because the SAC wants to consolidate all its troops in one position. Currently in northern Shan state in Laukkai city they ordered troops to abandon their positions and concentrate in one area - so it might be hard to attack these concentrated areas.

Also one of the scepticism about the resistance expressed in media analysis is that all these armed groups have different aims. So for instance, the ethnic armed groups, they only care about their own territories. They want to have autonomy in their own territories. Whereas the newly established armed groups like PDF, LDF, they want to just topple the military government once and for all. But they do have a common enemy - that is the military government, and also a common goal - that is federal democracy. These armed groups learned from history as well, so they know they can't fight in their own territories and they know as long as the military is there they will be attacked and as the military has superior firepower they will eventually lose their territories. The only way to combat that is the total collapse of the military government, so there has to be compromise between the different armed groups.

Also one interesting thing is the strategic location of all these armed groups. If you look up the map, it is quite fascinating that the Naypyidaw, the capital where the generals live, it's surrounded by all of these rebels in the north, in the east, in the southeast and in the west. And there has been a popular saying among the resistance, which is 'All roads lead to Naypyidaw.' So if the resistance picks up momentum and if they happen to seize all the important military positions of the military, the regime collapse could be very quick. But of course, that is a very hopeful reading of the situation. The more realistic interpretation will be that the rebels might gain some territories, but the military will continue to fight. But what that really means is that there has been renewed hope for the resistance. And of course, if this continues, the military government will be forced to make deals with the resistance groups.

Raisa: One last thing before you go, we do like to ask everyone who's participating in the podcast to recommend something to listen to, read or watch in case people want to learn about armed groups in Myanmar or just the situation in Myanmar in general. Do you have anything that you could recommend to our listeners?

Aung Kaung Myat: So because I'm a student of politics, I'd like to recommend three books that are in the field of politics. The first book is a classic. It helps us to understand why some of the enemy groups are fighting and what is the strategy of the military in crushing the resistance to its rule. It's

called [Burma: Insurgency and the politics of ethnicity by Martin Smith](#).

The second book, also a classic, is [Making enemies: War and state building in Burma](#). This book is written by Mary P Callahan. This book really goes into the details of the inner workings of the Burmese military and why they treat their own citizens as enemies.

And the last one is [Myanmar's enemy within: Buddhist violence and the making of a Muslim 'Other'](#) written by Francis Wade. This is basically about the Rohingya genocide. It writes on the perspectives of the Burmese government and why they began to view Rohingya as an enemy that has to be got rid of from some of the territories.

Raisa: Thank you so much Aung Kaung Myat, for taking the time to be with us today and for giving us an overview about what's happening in Myanmar right now.

The Editors (Raisa) - Himalmag

Aung Kaung Myat

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