

Myanmar fighters given hope from Syria

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The fall of the Assad regime has allowed rebels to find inspiration in their own offensive

AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES. Members of the rebel group Ta'ang National Liberation Army patrol near the Namhsan Township in Myanmar's northern Shan State in March, 2023.

When rebel fighters in Syria stunned the world with a rapid advance that defied all expectations, first breaking a years-long stalemate and then overthrowing Bashar al-Assad's regime entirely, people in Myanmar were paying particular attention – and drawing inspiration.

Myanmar has been consumed by civil war since February, 2021, when a military junta overthrew the country's semi-democratic government in a coup. While ethnic militias have fought successive Myanmar administrations for decades, the scale of resistance seen in the years since has surpassed anything that came before, and the military has suffered humiliating defeats, losing control of most of the country's border areas while clinging to power in major cities, including the capital, Naypyidaw and Yangon, the country's largest urban centre.

An offensive that began in October, 2023, appeared to be a tipping point as resistance forces – many operating under the umbrella of the parallel National Unity Government (NUG) – advanced across the country, seizing regional capitals and even threatening to take control of major centres like Myawaddy, on the border with Thailand.

But gains in recent months have been uneven, with rebels in western Myanmar's Rakhine state continuing to advance, but some groups in the country's north yielding to Chinese pressure to negotiate a ceasefire with the junta, even as Beijing has largely avoided providing the type of assistance the military would need to actually reclaim any of the territory it has lost.

Seeing an outside power put its thumb on the scale has been dispiriting to many inside Myanmar, and reminiscent of the situation in Syria where Russian and Iranian support was the only thing keeping Mr. al-Assad's brutal regime in power. But as recent weeks have shown, if that support wanes, and the military it is propping up lacks the capacity to fight on its own, things can unravel quickly.

"Although some of the underlying situations and developments are not the same, the Myanmar people are more convinced that all tyrants eventually fall," said NUG presidential spokesman U Kyaw Zaw, adding there is now "no stopping" the eventual defeat of junta leader Min Aung Hlaing.

The Globe and Mail interviewed multiple people living in military and rebel-held areas across Myanmar since the developments in Syria. All said they had taken inspiration from Mr. al-Assad's fall and drew encouragement that even a seemingly permanent stalemate could be broken. The Globe is not identifying these people in order to protect their safety.

One Yangon resident said he believes that if Syria could topple the Assad regime, the same could happen in his own country.

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Another person living in the former capital said they were also encouraged by recent events in South Korea, where protesters and legislators banded together to overturn a short-lived effort at military rule. They expressed regret, however, that the global media has largely paid less attention to what is happening in Myanmar than other countries, reducing the power of potential boycotts, sanctions or diplomatic pressure on the regime.

Thousands have been killed since the conflict began in 2021, and many more displaced by continuing fighting. The United Nations warned this month the number of displaced people within Myanmar could reach 4.5 million next year, while almost a third of the population, 19.9 million people, are in need of humanitarian assistance.

Miemie Winn Byrd, a retired U.S. Army lieutenant-colonel and professor at the Daniel K. Inouye Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies in Hawaii, said there were clear parallels with Syria, both in how Mr. al-Assad survived only because of outside help and the endemic corruption in both his and the Myanmar militaries, undermining their ability to wage a conflict alone.

“To have an effective fighting force, you can’t have any corruption, and the level of corruption in Myanmar is debilitating,” she said.

Dr. Byrd has interviewed senior military defectors who told her it was common to be reporting ghost soldiers or even whole units so they could collect pay for men who have died or never existed, while air force pilots – vital to the military’s defence – have been found to misreport flight times so they can sell leftover fuel on the side.

“The will to fight is gone,” she said.

The potential imminent collapse of the junta appears to have alarmed Beijing, which after largely sitting on the fence for several years has swung more forcefully behind Min Aung Hlaing, who in November made his first visit as leader to China. As well as putting pressure on rebel groups in the northeast, where Beijing’s influence is strongest, to cease fighting, there have been reports of Chinese private military corporations getting involved in Myanmar to protect Chinese assets.

The Globe found hiring ads from Chinese private military and security companies mentioning Myanmar, but none responded to detailed requests for comment.

While China’s intervention has given the military some breathing room, it has not stopped advances in Rakhine or Karen State, on the Thai border, and could yet backfire on Beijing, said Adam Simpson, a senior lecturer in international studies at the University of South Australia.

“Russia and Iran are now discovering that backing a brutal regime against popular opposition can leave military and economic assets stranded when the tide turns unexpectedly,” he wrote this

month.

Dr. Byrd agreed, saying antiChinese sentiment was growing in Myanmar, something that could hurt both Beijing and undermine what little popular support there is for the junta.

“China is playing a dangerous game,” she said. “As much as Beijing is focused on Myanmar, they don’t really understand the people, they understand the elite. So they’ve chosen a losing horse and they’re going to pay the price, just like Russia has paid in Syria.”

JAMES GRIFFITHS With a report from Alexandra Li in Beijing

P.S.

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