



***IT'S UP TO THE NATIONAL UNITY
GOVERNMENT TO FORGE "UNION
SPIRIT" IN MYANMAR***

BY SHWE YEE OO

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As the second anniversary of Myanmar's coup approaches, the international community has yet to develop an effective response to the crisis. The delayed reaction may be due to the ambiguities generated by the parallel governments competing for control of Myanmar: the ruling military (the junta) and the opposition National Unity Government (NUG). The two are deadlocked in the struggle for international recognition, with neither assured of victory. Given the ferocity of the junta's military campaign, the NUG must be creative and audacious to win the struggle for the future of Myanmar.

For the junta, the path to domestic victory appears to be the violent elimination of the opposition. According to international [human rights reports](#) and local/international [news sources](#), the military has burnt down villages, shelled schools, abducted innocent civilians, jailed political activists, and tortured resistance forces to death when captured. Growing friendship with China and Russia after the coup shields the Myanmar military from international scrutiny and helps it legitimize its rule through its own play at hosting [a 2023 election](#).

Working from the shadows, the opposition NUG leads the resistance forces in Myanmar while trying to establish its bona fides with the world's democratic communities as a legitimate alternative government. The European Union Parliament [issued](#) a resolution in October 2021 to support the NUG as the only legitimate representative of the people of Myanmar

but critics [say](#) the support did not amount to official recognition. US recognition of NUG is also pending despite sanctions on the Myanmar military.

Why is recognition of the NUG delayed? How can NUG make progress in bringing down the junta? What would the actual solution to the Myanmar crisis look like?

To answer these questions, one must understand how the NUG fits into the popular resistance movement against the junta.

The NUG was formed in April 2021 by the Committee Representing Pyidaungsu Hluttaw (CRPH), the group of ousted elected members of parliament following the February 2021 coup. After months of weakening the regime via a defensive military campaign involving ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), the NUG [declared](#) a "People's Defensive War" on Sept. 7, 2021. Despite the functional partnership in coordinating anti-military efforts between NUG and EAOs, [months of intense dialogue](#) have failed to achieve a shared vision for the future Myanmar. To build trust and make progress toward inclusive engagement, a primary dialogue platform was needed; the National Unity Consultative Council (NUCC) became the platform for the dialogue. Founded on March 8, 2021, the NUCC formed under the [Federal Democratic Charter](#) (FDC) and is composed of the CRPH, NUG, EAOs, ethnic political parties, civil society organizations, and civil-disobedient-movement groups. The NUCC seems more inclusive and diverse than previous working groups. The NUCC's priority is to build "a Federal Union" based on inclusivity, collective leadership, and coordination.

Historical divisions

Looking at history, a deeply rooted distrust is the fundamental cause of the frictions between Bamar majority and other ethnic groups. Even with the [Panglong treaty's](#) signing in 1947—an attempt at building trust and understanding named "Union Spirit"—only Kachin, Chin, and Shan leaders and Aung San (leader of the Governor's Executive Council) signed the agreement while the Karen sent just four observers to the conference. The treaty called

for the leaders to work with the then-Burmese interim government to achieve independence and to form the Union of Burma. Prior to the agreement, Shan and Karen leaders travelled to London and demanded the recognition of separate independent states in 1931 and 1946 respectively but failed to receive approval from the British government. Chin and Kachin did not trust Barman sincerity regarding equal rights. Some say that there was no representation for Karen or Karenni (Kayah), and no deliberation for Mon and Rakhine (considered to fall within Ministerial Burma) despite the promotion of the term “Union Spirit.”

Suspicion has only grown over time due to discrimination, maltreatment, repression, and abuse of power. Consequently, civil war has never ended since the 1948 independence. Although the democratic government endeavored to find a compromise among the ethnic groups to achieve true “Union Spirit” from 2016 to 2020 through four meetings of the 21st Century Panglong Peace Conference, it failed largely due to the military’s unwillingness to change its role as the sole guarantor of security and its self-centered view of national reconciliation. Plainly, trust-building has never succeeded, despite improvements in freedom and justice in the country.

It is time for the NUG to carry out the unaccomplished mission of bringing all the different ethnic groups together through the NUCC to create a truly unified alternative government and establish the vital Union Spirit. Given the longstanding insecurities and grievances, the only answer is “mutual understanding and unity” among ethnic groups, including the Bamar majority—something the military regime will never be able to accomplish. The major ethnic armed organizations such as KNU and KIO have been key players but have never been “the priority” when it comes to negotiation for peace with the military. The military has always sought to control peace talks.

The narrative is changing, however. As ethnic militaries play a critical role in countering the regime’s military oppression, their political counterparts should be engaged to restore democracy and draft the constitution for the envisioned Federal Union. Full-spectrum cooperation between the NUG and the EAOs is crucial. It is also an opportunity for

the NUG to express the Barman sincerity and willingness to generate reconciliation and inclusive governance. Given that the goal of both NUG and EAOs is to reach a Federal Democratic Union that guarantees equal rights and justice, a negotiated settlement should be within reach. Disagreements are understandable but should never stand in the way of progress.

The challenge for the NUG is to demonstrate that it can work with ethnic groups and make progress. If NUG could find compromise among all different groups, the military’s assertion that it is the sole source of national reconciliation would be exposed as false. Aggregating strength from different groups, including political parties and ethnic minority groups is the right way for NUG, EAOs and other minority groups to expel the junta and create federal democracy based on “Union Spirit.” This kind of solidarity is the “political commodity” the Myanmar people demand through the revolution. The NUG should also realize that the international community will likely remain skeptical of its capacity to reconcile and lead the country to overcome the crisis if it cannot demonstrate progress at building trust with different groups.

The solution to the Myanmar crisis and the key for the NUG is establishment of true and profound “Union Spirit” that will lead to a Federal Union. To begin that process, the NUG should initiate several dialogues, discussions, and negotiations via the NUCC. It is a daunting task but it is within reach.

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